



# Beauty and the Pucker

## (Puckers #4)

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** Kallie takes my world by storm the minute I see her riding into the rodeo arena, a total beauty with her long, auburn hair flowing in the wind.

The second we touch, I know Ill do anything to hold on tight to her, tighter than the bucking bulls I ride to let off steam in the off-season. Ill go to hell and back to win her heart.

Because shes mine, and has been from our first kiss. Too bad shes also my worst enemys ex. His problems mount but I refuse to let him drag her down with him. Ill do whats necessary to save her.

And in the world of hockey, well, sometimes you have to go for it, and leave it all on the ice to win, even if you have to break a few rules.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

## CHAPTER 1

### BULL RIDER BET

#### CODY “BIG D” FORD

Standing around, shooting the shit with the other cowboys, I get only a turned-up nose from the rodeo queen when I whistle at her low and slow through my teeth. She passes on by—nope, struts in her saddle—on the back of a pretty palomino. A red ribbon in her thick, long, auburn hair matches three bows tied in the horse’s mane.

“Damn, cowgirl. Why don’t you get to know me first before you break my heart?” I snicker and call after her. She holds up one hand and flips me the bird without even a backward glance at me. I like her spunk.

“She’s way outta your league, Cody. She’s been here all summer, and she’s turned us all down when we’ve asked her out. My sister says she’s getting over an ex and not interested.” Dwight guffaws. He’s a long-time friend of mine in the amateur rodeos around here.

In the off-season from playing hockey, I get back to my first love, rodeoing all summer long. My specialty: riding wild broncos.

My other specialty, when I’m not chasing a puck on the ice: chasing beautiful women. The more out of my league, the better. I love winning them over.

I love winning period.

“Oh yeah? Maybe she’s passed over boys like you, holding out for a man like me.” I point at my chest.

“What makes you think she’ll give you a shot?” He and the other guys howl. They’re all local and haven’t had the chance to see the world beyond Montana like I have. That’s what playing my ass off in hockey has done for me, broadening my horizons. I left my Montana hometown to chase my hockey dream, the journey taking me from Minnesota to Los Angeles, where I now play for The Puckers. We’re a scrappy team with a lot of heart.

“Shoot. I’m more in her league than you mother fuckers. Just wait. I’ll bet she’s mine by the end of the night.” I stake my claim to her.

“I got a twenty says she leaves you hanging.” The bet starts among them, and I love a challenge.

She’s the hottest woman I’ve laid eyes on all week. Hell, all summer. Being back at the Double Barr Ranch for training in an off-season hockey conditioning camp hosted by my good friend and coach, Duke Daniels, has been difficult, ass-busting work. I’m ready to trade the view of my teammates for something more soft and feminine tonight.

I leave the guys behind and shuffle over to the rails and climb them. With my ass perched on top, I watch her maneuver her horse into the arena while she holds a flagpole with the flag of the USA. I remove my hat out of respect and because my mama raised me right with manners and all, but the only thing I focus on is the announcer when he says her name.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for our national anthem and American flag, presented by Kallie Ann?—”

“Kallie,” I repeat to myself, ignoring the announcer stating her last name.

I like what I see of her. The way her name rolls off of my tongue would sound even better when I moan it as I come with her later tonight. Yep, I’m one cocky and horny dude. I know what I want when I see it.

The national anthem blares over the sound system, and she starts her horse on a trot, her heart-shaped ass bouncing in the seat with the horse’s gait. Mid-song, the pace picks up with a gallop, then they end it with a full-out run.

Always the grand finale of the presentation of the flag at the end of the anthem in rodeo, the song fades and she races past me out of the arena, her hair like fire, breezing behind her. A beautiful country girl vision for my eyes.

Next up comes the announcement of the cowboys competing tonight. I hop off the rails and hit my gear bag. Dad’s words come to mind as I fix his old leather chaps in place on my thighs, fastening the buckle. I can picture him now as he tightened my first pair of chaps on me when I was starting out long ago. He’d said, “Son... You gotta know when to hold on tight and when to let go. God willing, you’ll get the best bull of the night. He’ll do his part. The rest is up to you.”

All I’ve ever wanted was to make him proud. He’s gone now, but I still keep trying to prove I can make it, that everything Dad taught me growing up wasn’t a waste of his breath.

I hear the announcer call out the names of my competitors in bull riding, and I rush through the gates of the arena in time for mine.

“Cody... ‘Big D’... Ford!” The announcer elongates each name like a roar and the cheers turn up loud as I take my old Stetson off—another item of Dad’s—and wave it in the air to the fans. I’ve been entertaining this crowd for half a dozen years, each

summer hanging on tight to a bull that wants only to buck my ass off and leave me in the dust. I've won first place more often than not, and gained a good reputation for entertaining the crowd.

After the fanfare, me and all the cowboys exit, heading to our respective posts to prep for our events. Only there's Kallie on her horse, lined up with the other riders, apparently competing in barrel racing. The number pinned to her back is thirteen. I take it as a sign because my jersey on the Puckers is lucky thirteen, too.

She side-eyes me outside the ring as I pass her, eyebrow arching. "Big D? Seriously?"

"Wouldn't you like to find out, darlin'?" I wink. Her eyes take a sultry dance down the front of me. So, it begins. Hell yes, I have her interest. Now all I need is to hang on tight and win tonight. Then I'd find her and make my move.

When it's her turn, I sneak closer over to the rails of the arena again to watch her race. She manages a decent time and I'm impressed as she ends with the third best time overall. Nothing I like better than a woman who knows horses.

Bulls are last on the schedule, and I pulled the final ride. We're all in the chute, prepping the animals, the cowboys helping each other as we each compete, like a team. We might win individually, but the team camaraderie is always there.

Tonight, there's added pressure from another team in the stands—my hockey teammates who all gathered at the ranch this week for the conditioning camp at Duke's.

Between all of them watching, and me wanting to impress Kallie, too, landing on my ass and losing is not my goal here.

Finally my turn, I steel my jaw and get into position, hovering above “Old Buckeye,” a beast with a mean streak, so I’ve heard. Well, hell. As a left defenseman and the enforcer on the Puckers, I’m usually the one who has to get mean, fight the battles on the ice, defending my teammates, and start shit up when warranted or when the coach says so.

What most people don’t know about me is I’m really a good guy, a softie, and plenty of fun to be around. But when I need to raise hell, don’t count me out.

I close my eyes for a brief moment, long enough to conjure up the one thing in my life that pisses me off every single time I think of it. The one memory that raises my blood pressure. That is sure to put me in the right frame of mind to kick some ass.

The night my father was killed by a drunk driver...

“Ready, Big D?” Dwight calls, zapping me back to the present

“Let’s go, Old Buckeye. You’ve met your fucking match.” I scowl and drop on him, and the chute opens. Here we go.

One Mississippi...

Old B bucks right out of the gate, almost pinning my calf into the rails.

Two Mississippi... Three Mississippi...

I recover fast and rear my left arm back for balance, getting into a rhythm with this ornery bastard.

Four Mississippi... Five Mississippi...

The beast changes things up, twisting the other way.

Six Mississippi... Whoa. Fuck. I almost get tossed. I grip tighter on the rope.

Seven Mississippi... Eight Mississippi...

Oh yes, baby. I'm still hanging on tight. The fans are on their feet, yelling for more.

There's the horn.

Nine Mississippi... Ten Mississippi... Eleven Mississippi... Twelve Mississippi...

I give the fans the best show of the night and win the whole damn thing. The clowns take away the bull's attention, I slip off, and my boots land safely in the dirt, kicking up dust behind me. I pick up my hat and hold it high, cockily, taking in all the fan praise, all the glory, since I'm the victor tonight.

Now to claim my prize.

It's the rodeo queen herself, handing out the silver belt buckles to the winners. When it's my turn, I step right up to her and lean down. Big mistake. Her fragrance of vanilla infused with sweet wild flowers teases my senses—and there's something else there, too. A scent of a woman. This ain't no silly buckle bunny with nothing better to do than chase cowboys all summer long. No, there's something different about her. Up close, I can tell she's about my age, with a confident air. Smart. All class.

Fuck me.

Out of my league, the perfect challenge. Just the way I like it. She looks like she needs a good time, someone to wash away the memories of her ol' ex. Yeah. I'll bet she's a real wild child underneath her gorgeous exterior. I take a chance.

“If you’re curious what the Big D stands for, why don’t you be a good girl and follow me to the hay barn, darlin’. I’ll show you all my secrets,” I casually whisper my invitation into her ear.

She backs up, glaring at me. I almost thought she’d slap me. “Leave it in your pants, cowboy. You’re not getting any of this.” She motions down her curvaceous body, then walks away.

“I guarantee you the ride of your life. Come on, darlin’, don’t make me beg.”

“I’m nobody’s darling.” She yells back. “Try a buckle bunny. I hear they’re easy prey.”

My mouth hits the ground while I watch her get into a truck with a friend and drive away.

“Damn.” I seriously need to adjust my big dick after letting a firecracker like that walk out of my life.

Dwight and the cowboys all get rowdy, laughing at me, slapping their thighs, as they figure out who won their bet.

I put my gear away and avoid their jeers. My teammates Storm and Saint find me and offer both congratulations for winning and condolences for not making a better impression on Kallie.

Oh well. Like Dad told me, I have to know when to let things go. But something tells me a woman like Kallie won’t be easy to forget.



### CHAPTER 2

#### GOODBYE, RODEO QUEEN

KALLIE ANN CAMPBELL

I strip the sash up and over my head the second we hit the dirt road.

“Goodbye, Rodeo Queen,” I say, sad to see this summer come to an end. With the window rolled down, the rodeo grounds disappearing behind us, I hang it out and almost let it go so the wind could carry it away.

“Come on, Kallie. You have to admit that it’s been a fun summer, what with all your obligations to appear at every major event across the county,” Dixie says and chuckles, her wild blonde curls blowing out the window the summer heat. Soon enough, the weather will turn chilly in Montana.

Dixie may be my cousin, almost like a sister to me, and kind enough to have let me hide away here with her the past few months, but this idea of hers to enter the rodeo pageant a few months ago wasn’t the greatest.

By the time I’d arrived in Montana, she had already entered and talked me into competing, too, just for the fun of it. I was weary and emotional and not thinking straight when I landed on her doorstep in early June; she caught me at a vulnerable time, willing to do anything to forget my old life for a while. Never would I have imagined I’d win the darn event.

I was a complete basket case, having escaped my real life in Austin. I needed a break, and to figure things out for the summer. She's right. If not for the schedule of appearances as the Queen—groundbreaking of the new bank in town, cocktails to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the mayor and his wife, and talking to a Girl Scout troop about the history of women's rights in this country, some of my favorites to name a few—I might have spent the entire summer curled into a ball on her couch crying my eyes out every single day.

I stash the satin sash in my bag when my phone rings for the hundredth time, if I'm counting. Which I'm not. One glance at it and I know the caller could only be one of two people. Either my father or my ex. Lord knows, my mother wouldn't call me.

"Dad," I whisper, hovering my thumb, hesitating to answer it. Dixie grips the steering wheel tighter, gunning the truck for town.

"Dammit. This is the last weekend you're here. You don't report back to your old life until Monday. We're partying tonight. He can wait. I can't even believe you agreed to go back, anyway. Fuck," she curses, slamming her palm on the wheel.

I let his call go to voice mail. "I know, but we've been over this. My life is in Texas. My job is there. Dad and Mom." My ex. I swallow hard. The memory of his handsome good looks floods my mind. So does all the shit he pulled.

"Sure. But what you don't need is for your ex-idiot getting his hooks into you again," she warns, not telling me anything I don't know.

"No, seriously. As fun as this summer has been, I need to return and face things."

There are wedding presents to return. So many presents. Most are from Dad's business friends and associates, who I don't even know. I also need to move all of my things from the house I once thought I'd occupy with my former soon-to-be new

husband.

“But thank you for being here for me, Dixie. If there’s one thing my escape from Austin did, it was getting Jeremy out of my system.” I hope.

“Ugh. That name. You said we wouldn’t say his name.” She suddenly laughs, the cackle jolting me. “But how about that, Big D? Now there’s a name for you.”

I join her giggling, because yeah, talk about a cocky cowboy. “With a name like that, not only do I have to wonder what exactly is big about him, but how the hell a grown man can allow people to call him Big D.”

“He was hot, though. Did you get a good look at him?” She wiggles her brows.

With dirty blond hair, a smoldering smile and blue eyes that could strip the pants off of me with one look? Yes, I took in more than my fair share of the man would could pass for a younger Brad Pitt.

“And the size of his thighs? And that ass in Wranglers?” She doesn’t stop. “You were so close to him, handing out the buckle. You must have gotten a whiff of him. Did he smell all manly man? Gah, I love a manly musk, all outdoorsy, but before it’s turned into body odor, you know what I mean?”

“Actually... It all happened so fast. I forget to breathe.”

“I can’t blame you. He’d steal my breath away, too. My heavens, the way he rode that bull. Bet he gives one helluva ride in bed, whether or not he’s got a big D.” Dixie is so funny, she makes me snort.

“You’re so infatuated with him, he should have propositioned you. He’d have had more luck.”

When I needed to run away from my life, she was the one person I could count on to be there for me.

I remember the huge fight I'd had with Dad, a week after I'd called off the wedding with Jeremy—Nope. Dixie is right. Tonight, we're meeting up with our friends to party at the bar. Everything else can wait until Monday.

My thumb stays poised over my phone, though, itching to hear what Dad says in his voice mail.

A big sigh comes from Dixie. "Go on. Listen to the dang thing. You know it'll just eat away at you all night if you don't. Let's get it over with. We're almost at the bar. Then whatever dear Uncle Campbell says, I'll buy you a beer to get over it."

Fuck it. I click into it, putting it on speaker so she can listen, too.

"Kallie Ann? It's Dad." Through the phone, his grumpy old voice breaks, thanks to years of smoking fine cigars from Cuba.

I can just picture his scowling face, bushy gray eyebrows and steely eyes. He looks like an old scrooge, and more like a grandfather than a father, although his age only caught up to him in recent years.

My mother had married this man twenty-two years older than her. Their wedding photos from the time showed the epitome of robust youthfulness, mired in the glitz and glamour of big Texas living. Sadly, time and a loveless marriage did neither of them any good. My mother's drinking and drugging added wrinkles, and her efforts to keep up with plastic surgery did little to reverse the process of hard partying.

"...calling with just a reminder that we had a deal. You needed the summer off, fine. But hockey season starts up soon and I need you back. Monday. The deadline for you

to return and claim your position is Monday. Or I'll have no choice but to hire someone else. Sorry, sweetie. Nothing personal, this is just business."

He doesn't end it with an "I love you" or an "I can't wait to see you next week", just an abrupt click. That's Dad. All business. And I'm sure he's itching to hire a man to take my place, anyway.

He's probably hoping I won't come back, praying I'll be like Mom, and retire from his business to be just a show-piece, called into action only when he needs someone pretty on his arm. But I could never be her... Will never be her.

"Wouldn't he just shit if you didn't go back? Stay. Please. Pretty please. Please. Please." Dixie has been begging me all week. I'll miss her, but I need to go back to my life. Not forever, though. I think I'm ready to move on and figure out what else to do, but first, I need to go back and bring closure to it all.

I can't explain why. Maybe because my ex and my dad are such assholes. In a weak moment, I ran from the hell they put me through. But I'll be damned if I let them see me that way. No. I'll go back and show them what I'm made of, if it kills me to do it. Then I'll plot my next move—away from them.

Tonight, though, I'm getting wild, letting loose, and having fun with Dixie and our old college friends. We're all staying at the Yahoo Inn here in town, and meeting up at Top's Tavern for drinks. It should be a blast and help me forget all of my problems for a while.

### CHAPTER 3

#### ANYTHING GOES

##### KALLIE

I love these girls. All of my college friends from Montana State University still live locally and meet us at the tavern. It's like a mini-college reunion, so great to get caught up with them.

We'd graduated a few years ago, and all but one of us is still single, although a few have serious boyfriends. I'd have been next had I gone through with marrying Jeremy.

I'll miss Montana when I leave tomorrow. My mom grew up around here, having met my dad through family friends at some rancher convention long ago. So despite our home being on one of the biggest ranches near Austin, Texas, Mom's family ties often led to us visiting here. It was only natural that I got my business degree from MSU, and it got me away from Mom and Dad, giving me the space to be out from under their thumbs for four years, at least.

Later, with a couple of drinks in us, we all loosen up and get on the dance floor to a popular country tune, falling into a line dance. Around here, men like to lead a lady on the dance floor, so glares come our way each time we impose upon the space, spreading out to do our single moves. We tease the cowboys watching our wiggling hips, while not requiring their dancing services one bit.

One dude brazenly rakes me over—ugh, one with a tooth missing in front, tall and lanky, wearing a sleeveless flannel. The rodeo brings all kinds of strangers to town. No thanks.

There's only one I wouldn't mind wrapping his arms around me for the night—if I dared let anyone bust down my ten foot tall brick wall against all men for a moment. I spot Big D leaning against the bar drinking a beer with two other men, all of them studs, so gorgeous compared to the other rough cowboys. They are almost other-worldly, like they have one foot in another realm and one foot here. Big D might be a cowboy, but one look at him and you can tell there's more to him than this rugged Montana life.

He must have showered and changed after the rodeo. With a fresh plaid shirt, open to a muscle t-shirt underneath that hugs his pecs, and arms folded up to his elbows, he's mighty fine. He hasn't spotted me yet, unless he's doing a great job pretending. I could change all of that by simply strutting by, only to hear what might come out of his mouth next. Could be fun. But I don't. The song ends, and I head back to our table and grab up my drink.

“My, my. Did you see who's here?” Dixie glues herself to my hip, leaning in. I know she's talking about Big D. I'm about to tell her to drop it, to remind her of my self-imposed dry spell for the summer, all designed to rid my body of a reliance upon any man.

What Jeremy did to me... It'd be a long time before I could forgive. Even longer before forgetting. But she has insisted all summer, forgetting would be a helluva lot easier getting under another man. I just don't have the energy to give to a one-night stand. I don't think.

I sneak another glance over her shoulder at Big D, giving it pause. But there's a whoosh of air on my other side, and my skin crawls before I even turn my head to see

who's standing there. The toothless guy.

"Hey. You're lookin' mighty fine tonight, queen. Why don't you let me spin you properly around the dance floor?" He sways and his laughter sends a blast of alcohol infused breath into my face, the kind laced with bad breath to begin with. I shudder and wince, turning away.

Dixie can't save me, as she's busy talking with one of her guys, one of a few she dates, all of them knowing they could never lock down a free spirit like hers.

The idiot behind me grabs my arm, bringing my attention back to him. "What ya say we show your friends how to really dance?"

"No, thanks." I yank away, making off for the bathroom, my only refuge. But he catches up to me, twirling me around by the waist.

"Don't rush off now. Our night's just gettin' started."

"Oh, no it is not." I quickly knee him, although I miss my intended spot in the center of his groin, hitting his boney thigh instead. It's enough for him to let go of me so I can get away.

Ahead of me is Big D, with his blue eyes fixated on me. He sees me now. He elbows and murmurs something to his buddy beside him, then points at me, like he can't believe his eyes as I draw nearer.

Toothless rushes up behind me, so close I can smell his breath once again.

I launch myself at Big D, wrapping my arms around his neck, and I purr. "There you are, sugar. I've been waiting all night for you."



My lips engage softly with his, lingering there, hoping to deceive Toothless enough that he'd give up the chase. Only Big D must know a good thing when he has it in his arms, because he wastes no time picking me straight up. He slices through my lips with his tongue, a tangle of cinnamon heating my taste buds. His body is cozy warm, solid like a tree. He stands here as if he's been plucked right from one of my hottest fantasies. His lips devour, taking without asking, demanding more, knowing my answer by the traitorous mewls escaping my throat.

The pool of wetness gathers in my panties, shocking me. How many days, months—fuck, years—has it been since I've been this wet for a man? Not even Jeremy has ever produced this kind of instant attraction, instant lust from my body.

I cling to Big D like he's my wild bull. Have I hung on tight for eight seconds? I deserve my own belt buckle as a reward. When I finally pull my lips away, I want more. His eyes, blue and bold, gaze right into the heart of me.

But... But...

My mind scrambles trying to recall why I don't want a man right now.

Oh, yeah. Because of my ex.

I find my voice again. "Is the jerk behind me in the sleeveless shirt with the gap tooth grin gone now?"

Big D doesn't answer, still staring right into me. His lips remain puckered in kissing position like I froze him in time.

One of his buddies speaks for him, though. "Yes ma'am. He saw you kissing my friend here, Big D, and left."

I arch a brow and lick my lips. “Big D? There’s that name again. You can put me down now. Thanks for letting me borrow your lips. They came in handy.”

His hold on me loosens, and I slowly slide down the front of him. He groans as I pass over the stiff rod in his pants—hard to ignore when my body skims it. Even harder to ignore when it is, in fact, rather sizable.

Finding solid ground under my boots, and trying to pretend he hasn’t shaken me to my core, I wink and sashay away, right into Dixie’s giggling hug.

“How fucking hot was that?” She exclaims.

One of her friends pulls my sash out of my bag and puts it over my head, calling me the Queen of Hearts and Hard-ons. Another puts a fresh bottle of beer in my hand. They all yip and holler as a new song kicks up from the DJ.

Yes. One more night to celebrate being young and free. Monday would arrive soon enough. My deadline to be an adult again.

We stay on the dance floor, stomping through another tune. Only my eyes can’t help but catch Big D’s every time I turn his way.

Dixie crowds me, dancing up behind me, and speaking just loud enough for me to hear. “He’s got it bad for you. Go for him tonight, sweetie. You need this.” She pushes me forward so I can’t ignore the large man making his way toward me.

Like my body is drawn back into his arms, he doesn’t even have to ask for me to dance with him. We just do and connect. Our eyes lock, our bodies melt together, and I hardly even hear the music while swaying in his arms. There’s something about him. We’ve said only a few dozen words to each other, but I feel closer to him than I did after a few years with Jeremy.

By the time the song ends, he leans down, nuzzling my neck, sending a thrill down my spine. His hot breath and words land in my ear. “Want to get out of here, cowgirl?”

A cowgirl is all I’ve ever wanted to be. How did he know? Running Dad’s ranch was my dream, until he hired a new man for the job, and demanded I work in his sports entertainment business instead.

“Where to?” I ask. I break from Big D’s gaze with a quick glance over to Dixie. She holds up her thumbs, smiling and winking. I interpret that as, You better claim this cowboy now or I’ll never forgive you. Or maybe it’s finally making sense, what she’s been saying all along, that a handsome cowboy like him can force me to forget Jeremy.

“Ah, shit.” He chews his cheek. “My buddy drove us here and we’re bunking in cabins out on the Double Barr ranch. Not exactly private accommodations. How about you? Do you live nearby?”

I’m not usually a one-night stand type of gal, but right now, anything goes. Dixie shares a room with her college roommate tonight, leaving me with my own room, which suits me fine. I planned on a soak in the clawfoot tub later, but plans change.

“I have a hotel room up on the top floor.” I nod, resolute with my decision. Because I’m a grown woman and I’ll take this bad boy to my bed for some fun.

His sly, cocky grin twists my insides all up. “Then I guess you’ll be my darlin’ tonight after all.”

“Shut up, cowboy.” I laugh, and take his hand.

“Lead the way, darlin’. I’m all yours. ” His deep voice awakens every place that had

been lulled to sleep by Jeremy. I parade him through the bar as if claiming the best prize of the night, ignoring the glares of jealousy from other women tracking us as we pass.

I feel like a new woman in control of my destiny. After all, walking in Monday to Dad's office, taking over the marketing department for his hockey team, and having to face both him and Jeremy would be so much better knowing I'd been good and fucked all night by Big D—who I desperately hope possesses a really big dick and knows how to use it. Yes, that'd be the exact confidence boost I'd need to face what's coming Monday.

### CHAPTER 4

#### SIX OF THEM

#### BIG D

“Wake up, sugar lips,” I whisper in Kallie’s ear, then inhale her lobe into my mouth, teasing my tongue along the ridge.

“Mmm.” She’s out, eyes closed, and curled into a ball.

I hate leaving her this morning, but Storm texted Duke is heading into town to pick up fresh donuts for the team and his wife and kids. He’ll meet me on the corner. Otherwise, I’d have a good ten-mile walk back to the ranch, at least.

God, she’s fucking gorgeous. I brush a curl from her face and wish we could have more time together. This would be the perfect view to wake up to every morning. In fact, I take my phone and snap a photo of sleeping beauty, not something I typically making a habit doing after a one night stand.

I finally tear my eyes away from her and observe the condition of the room, replaying all the highlights of our wild night here.

There’s the door, where I had her back up against it after we entered her room, kissing her madly, linking our hands above her head. The way she ground on my knee between her thighs had prompted me to ask my first question. “That’s it, ride my leg cowgirl. Damn, how long has it been since you broke things off with your ex?”

“Three months. Congratulations. Looks like you’re my rebound, cowboy,” she’d moaned, breathless between kisses, tackling the buttons of my shirt. I’ve never been happier to be a rebound in my life than at that moment.

The path of our clothes was strewn about from when we stripped each other down. I’d picked her up and landed her pretty ass on the dresser, where I ripped off the last piece, her panties.

“And how long since that dickhead gave you an orgasm?” My thumb brushed against her slick slit with this second question.

“Six months,” she hissed. “But in all honesty, the last year of our time together had been dismal at best. He, um, cheated on me with my maid of honor, Marissa. They carried on an affair, maybe still are, for all I know.” Her face lowered, shaking from side to side.

I couldn’t have her sad and thinking of another man while she was in my arms. I plucked her chin up with my finger and thumb. “There should be a special place in hell for a guy who would treat you like shit. I never would. Tell you what. Tonight, I’ll give you six toe-curling orgasms before we’re through, one to make up for each month that you should have been good and thoroughly fucked. I promise.”

“You are such a dirty and funny cowboy.” She laughed at me, only ratcheting my need to succeed in this challenge even higher. “I have a difficult enough of a time managing to have one orgasm. I’d settle for just one good one with you.”

“Never settle, baby, when you could have the best.”

“My, you’re so cocky.”

“Why do you think they call me Big D?”

There's the end of the bed where I knelt between her legs and gave her three with my tongue and fingers. Where I'd lapped up her sweet essence, then I carried her to the bathtub. I let her ride me for her fourth, and my first, then we bathed in the bubbles together, talking, laughing. She admitted taking baths is her favorite thing in the world. Everything felt so easy with her.

My name moaning from her lips as she came each time still echoes in my ear. A sound I won't forget anytime soon.

I stand and gather my clothes and get dressed. My phone pings with a text from Duke saying he'll be here in about five minutes and I'd better get my dick back in my pants and be waiting outside.

With a sigh, I pick up the empty tiny tequila bottles and candy bar wrappers and throw them away, the evidence from when we raided the mini fridge together after the bath. They were the sustenance we needed before I attempted to give her the final two orgasms I'd promised in bed.

I slid into her wet channel, stretching her tight walls and fucking her. First, on her back, where her nails dug into my skin and she begged for harder, faster, more, then on her hands and knees, until she came and passed out right as I finished.

I laid here until the sunrise, watching her sleeping beside me, thinking about my life and my future. A night like this can change a man. It was perfect. She shouldn't forget me anytime soon. She'd probably have trouble walking today.

The truth is, I wouldn't forget her.

I perch on the edge of the bed next to her again, my weight making the mattress groan. My knuckles caress her cheek. "Hey, sweetheart. Wake up. I have to go. But I'd like your number. I don't know when or how, but I want to see you again."

Dang, I haven't wanted something more than a one nighter in a long, long time. Saint would probably laugh at me and tell me I'm going soft. He's such a man whore. Guess I've been one too these past couple of years. I haven't had a woman who makes me want more until last night.

"Mmm." She shifts in the bed, turning flat on her back, the sheet falling below the soft swell of her breasts. Her nipples harden from the cool air-conditioned room. I swallow. Fuck me. If Duke wasn't about to pick me up, I'd undress and lie with her longer. But cowboy life is done for the summer. Time to get back to hockey conditioning camp and back to my real life.

Screw it, the temptation of a perfectly pink nipple proves too much. I lean in and latch my lips to it, twirling the peak slowly with my tongue. Her skin, smooth like velvet, tantalizes, enticingly sweet like the vanilla lotion she spread on after we bathed. I inhale her womanly scent one more time. When a gasp escapes her lips, I let her nipple go with a pop.

"Morning, Kallie." I smile up at her sleepy eyes and wink.

"Hi. Wh-what time is it?"

"Time for me to go, unfortunately. I took the liberty of ordering you some coffee. The room service should deliver it soon. I put a twenty on the dresser to pay for it and a tip."

"Thanks. I think." She pulls the sheet over her and rubs her eyes, then focuses on me, like she's trying to recall all the details of our night together. Maybe I gave her a concussion, loving on her so good like I did. "Cody, about last night, um..."

At least she remembers my name.



“Guess I proved you wrong. One orgasm wasn’t enough. You should never settle, baby.” I thread our fingers together. She bites her bottom lip. My self control wears thin. “Listen. I want to see you again. Give me your number.”

“Oh. Um...” Why is she hesitating?

“Come on, darlin’. Don’t break my heart before we’ve even started. I can’t be just your rebound guy. Not after last night.”

“It’s just that I don’t live here. I’m leaving for Austin later today.”

There’s a plot twist I didn’t see coming. In my head, I’d already started figuring out where in the fall hockey schedule I could squeeze in another trip to Montana. Looks like I’m Austin-bound instead.

My phone buzzes. Shit. I take it out. That’s Duke texting, pissed I’m not outside waiting.

“That’s okay. I live in L.A. Let’s just keep in touch. You never know when our paths might cross again.”

She opens and closes her mouth like she wants to discuss it more. But then she rattles off her number. I ignore another text from Duke, and quickly save her number under Rodeo Queen.

“I have to go, but I’m shit at goodbyes, so...” One last time, I kiss her lips, lingering there with her, hoping there’s more to come in our future.

I finally pull myself away and shuffle to the door, but turn for one last gaze at her.

“Wait. Did you really give me six um...?” Her eyes wide, she’s fully awake now, as

the realization hits her.

With a cocky smile, I nod. “See you soon, darlin’.” I leave her there to linger in the bliss I’d brought her, certain she’s wanting more. I think that’s a very good place to leave a woman. She’ll be ready for me when I call her. Soon.

### CHAPTER 5

#### BLINDSIDED

#### KALLIE

Empathetic eyes greet me as I exit the elevators on my first day back from Montana. The assistants at the front desk ask politely how my summer was. I'm positive they know what's going on, how I cancelled my fancy wedding—with a half million dollar budget—a week before the wedding day and spent the past few months hiding away.

I walk past them, into the corporate office for the Austin Capitals, with my head held high.

It didn't help that my big blowout with Dad was right here in his office, where everyone could hear me flip out. He was pissed that I'd canceled the wedding. Called me selfish for not standing by my man, that I should have forgiven his minor indiscretions, and told me to grow up.

Is that what my mother does for him? Forgive him and his failings while he tangles with the devil in one affair after the other? At the same time, he puts up with her drinking. Sorry, but that's not the type of marriage I want.

To make matters worse, I was supposed to start working for Dad after the honeymoon. As our arguing boiled over, he wanted me to patch things with Jeremy, threatening me if I didn't. I was tired of his condescension, of the way he treated Mom, of his expectations of me, and for favoring my ex-fiancé more than his own

daughter. I'd had enough and fled all the way to Montana, to Dixie and to a summer away from my life to clear my head.

I pass by everyone with barely a smile and march through the bullpen of cubicles down to Dad's corner office. The whispers of the workers in my wake don't deter me. I'm ready to take the new position and prove to Dad I'm fine without Jeremy.

Only a sight stops me short. A maintenance worker stands at the door to the office next to Dad's. He attaches a new silver name plate to it and wipes it clean with a microfiber towel. I finally read the name when he stoops to pick something up.

The plate reads—Jeremy Whittaker.

The oxygen leaves my body, abandons every cell.

Under it, the worker applies another plate with the label "Director of Marketing."

"What the hell, Dad?" I storm into his office and slam the door behind me. I used to love the smell of his leather chairs, the rich burlled wood desk, and his pricey cologne, all the scents of his power and prestige. Now, it makes me ill.

"This isn't personal, Kallie, but Jeremy pitched some fresh ideas to me last week, and I had to make a decision. He's the best man for the job." The best man, not candidate, I note him saying. "But don't worry. I'm sure you'll put your business degree that I paid for to good use. You'll be working for him in charge of the team's PR."

"Why, Dad? You know we broke up." I think I even stomped my foot, so angry at him and this situation. "How dare you do this without discussing things with me first."

"How dare I? You weren't here. You were up in Montana having a good old time.

You're just like your mother, running away from all her problems."

I suck in a breath. This news blindsides me. I make my way to the door. "I can't work for my ex. I refuse."

He rushes to my side before I can twist the knob, seething. "You will marry Jeremy. You will take the job I kindly give you. If you don't, then I take away everything you have including your trust fund. You'll get nothing from me when I die."

I don't want anything from him, but I've never been without. Except this summer, when I lived with Dixie and got to see how someone my age with a mediocre job and an apartment made ends meet. It wasn't so bad. We had cheap meals she brought home, leftovers from her struggling cafe she opened after college. I helped her every afternoon, waiting tables, washing dishes. I started her social media accounts for her business. Box wine suited us fine, especially better when under the stars on the roof of the building each night. And we were happy with the simplicity of it all.

I had Dad's money still going into my bank account, but I didn't want to spend a cent. It was security though, knowing that if something bad happened I could fall back on it. Although I'd left Dixie a check, a chunk of my savings, for her to find after I left since she refused to take money from me.

The security of his money proves too strong as I stare into his mean eyes. Once Dad makes these decisions, I long ago learned, he doesn't reverse them, and I don't have the patience to argue today.

I need to regroup and figure things out, face him again another day. He must sense it and let's me go, so I retreat out of the office. About halfway down the rows of cubicles, fuming, I run into the new director of marketing himself. Jeremy stands before me, smiling, his hazel eyes clear and bright, for once.

Our summer apart looks good on him.

His light hair is cropped short in a stylish business type of cut. Clean shaven jaw shows off soft smooth skin that never saw a blackhead, ever. He almost takes my breath away, transformed back into the man I first fell in love with.

That was long before I found out about his addiction to painkillers and alcohol. He'd begged me not to tell my father about it.

With a coffee mug in each of his hands, he opens his mouth and arms as if welcoming me home. I stop him before he can speak, hiding my hand up.

"Don't. I'm mad at you. How could you do this, taking my job? Some of your ideas were probably even mine that I'd discussed with you last spring." I ball my fists onto my hips, just getting started, ready to unload an even bigger tirade. In front of everyone.

He holds a coffee mug to me, like a peace offering. I could smell my favorite cappuccino that Dad stocks in the office kitchen here. The milk is frothed perfectly with a cinnamon swirl on top.

Screw him if he thinks I can be bought with his gorgeous face and a the best coffee. I ignore it and spin around him, but he follows me to the elevator.

"Kallie, stop. Look, Dad had been interviewing candidates for the job, with no intention of ever giving you the top position."

"What?" That stabs me in the heart. Plus, I hate how close the two of them are, how he started calling my father "Dad" long before we were even engaged. He's like the son Dad always wanted, and you know fucking what? They deserve each other.

“I couldn’t let him do that to you, so I expressed my interest. The idea grew on him. You’ll thank me when we’re married because now we have a solid foot into his business.”

“Married?” In sheer terror, I turn on him with wide eyes and wondering what planet I just landed on, where my ex thought we’d still be together after everything that happened.

The office grows quiet, all eyes watching us like we’re some reality TV show on Bravo.

“Come with me.” He sets the mugs down on someone’s desk and yanks me hard by the elbow, steering me into a nearby office. One where my name appears on the door with the title “PR Manager” underneath. All the letters much smaller than the letters that now appear on his door. I’ll bet I’m paid quite less, as well.

He practically shoves me into the room and slams the door shut. I cross my arms, rubbing my elbow, huffing over to the window. At least I have a decent view of the capital building, but at what price to my soul if I stay and put up with this?

He rushes up behind me, softening, running his hands down my arms, daring to touch me. “I missed you,” he whispers.

At least his breath doesn’t reek of alcohol like our last conversation, the one where I told him I couldn’t marry a drunkard and a substance abuser. And a cheater.

My stomach roils. I shift out of his hold, and run for the door. If he follows, I don’t know. I don’t stop running until I’m at my car.

For an hour, I drive around Austin until I finally stop at our house. The beautiful million dollar custom built home I thought we’d be happy in after the wedding, where

we'd raise our children, complete with a family dog named Buster.

That dream shattered the day I caught him fucking my maid of honor.



## Page 6

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### CHAPTER 6

#### ON PURPOSE

#### BIG D

I walk around with my head in the clouds. My night with Kallie never once leaves my thoughts, plaguing me and yearning for a repeat. I plan to call her as soon as I get the final game schedule for the year, and today we got it.

Duke hands sheets out to all of us in the locker room before practice. “Start arranging your lives, men. From our first game tomorrow to the last one in the spring, and hopefully into the playoffs. Hockey needs to become your sole focus.”

He knows since we all play at the semi-professional level, some of us have other jobs, some guys even have families. Duke’s a good friend, having played with us first before he was promoted to head up the coaching staff. He spent some time in the pros before he came to The Puckers. The guys respect the hell out of him, and with luck, we’ll make this another championship year like the last.

I scan the schedule and immediately find a pocket of a few days after we play against San Antonio in the fourth week, where I can zip on over to Austin and wet my rod inside of Kallie. My fist pumps the air, matching the excited grin on my face—assuming she’s been pining away for me like I imagine her doing. But I have to play this cool. Can’t let her know how much she affects me.

“Let’s go. Hit the ice,” Duke calls, and my teammates shuffle out of the locker room

after him. I lag behind and grab my phone.

“Hey, I’ll be a few. I have a call to make.” I tell Saint, who questions me with a look but doesn’t ask.

Once the room clears, I dial my rodeo queen, grinning from ear to ear. I just want to hear my name from her lips again. With the memory of the way she rode my huge D, cried out “Big D!” and discovered just how much Big D can spoil her, I’m confident she won’t turn down my visit.

I get to the fifth ring and the voicemail picks up. Only it says, “Mailbox is full.”

“Fuck. What?” Okay. Maybe she’s a busy woman. It’s not lunchtime yet. Perhaps she clears her messages later. I’ll try calling again after practice.

Until then, I send a text to her number, simply typing in Hey. Very cool and easy. But it’s returned like she’s paused receiving messages.

“Shit.” I blink at the phone.

Duke’s roar echoes from the ice, giving the team hell for being slow today. I store my phone and rush out. My blades hit the ice, still eager as hell, still grinning wide, not deterred at all by this minor hiccup. I know who I want and I’ll get her.

“Look who is light on his feet today,” Saint guffaws.

“The fuck got into him?” Storm grumbles.

“The promise of a pretty pink pussy, my friends.” I wink and lap them again as Duke orders the team to skate extra circles for a while.

They catch up to me. “Who might this said pussy belong to?” Storm asks.

Saint howls, leaning elbows on his knees and coasting on his skates. “And does she have any friends?”

“You assholes here to work today or what?” Duke catches up to us, turning and skating backwards so we can see his grumpy face, the one he adopted the second he switched from being our teammate to our boss.

“Sorry, coach. But can’t help it. I’m planning to see a chick in Austin when we’re in Texas soon,” I explain.

“I knew it had to do with a woman,” Storm says, and the guys all chuckle.

“Is this the one you met in Montana?” Duke asks.

“That chick I met at the rodeo. Yep.” My insides twist thinking of my little rodeo queen and how good it’ll be to slide into her again. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this about a woman.

“What a way to meet someone. At least your ass wasn’t naked at first sight.” Saint snorts, taking a dig at Storm, who had somehow been swindled of his clothes by some old ladies. Then he had to streak through his apartment building to get to his place, only to run into his neighbor’s gorgeous granddaughter for the first time while holding a book in front of his junk.

Storm splits off, pissed, skating faster away from us, even in his heavier goalie gear and all. We’re still waiting for him to share the full story about how he wound up naked in the first place. One of these days, Saint and I agreed we’ll get him drunk and force it out of him.

“You think you can focus and give me two good hours on the ice today? If you guys want the cup this year, or hell, to even get noticed by the pros, you need the practice.” Coach skates off, and Saint slaps my shin guards, both of them leaving me trailing behind.

I know Duke’s right. Yes, I have goals to get into a pro team. I’ve had enough of shuffling around in the semi-pros. I’m ready to claim a spot on a starting roster and stay there.

It takes everything that I have to shut out all thoughts of Kallie and force myself into the zone, but that’s what a pro does in the sporting world.

Later, after practice, I call her number again, only I get the same message saying her mailbox is full. “Son of a bitch.”

With every day that passes, I try again and again. After two weeks of this, I give up, turning grumpy as all hell. I’m long past pissing off my teammates.

That cloud I’ve been walking on since meeting Kallie opens, and I fall through flat on my face. I know nothing about her, except she loves taking baths and lives in Austin. Not even her last name until I scour the Lewistown news online and find an old post announcing “Kallie Ann Campbell Earns Rodeo Queen Title.”

Campbell. The article doesn’t say much about her, other than she has family ties in the Lewistown area, and she spent a few years in college at MSU on the equestrian team.

I search online for her, but nothing comes up. No social media, nothing. I stop short at calling every Campbell I find online in Texas to ask about her. She’s becoming an obsession of mine, but I need to stop.

I lament to Saint after practice one day. “This is fucked. I must have gotten her number wrong. What if she’s the one for me and I messed it up?”

“Or she gave you the wrong number on purpose. ” Leave it to Saint to deliver that slap in the face. I’m normally the good-time guy, the one to bring a smile and a laugh to people’s faces. This situation has messed with my head real good.

My heart sinks, at first. Then I get mad. Saint’s right. This entire time I let my ego get in the way, sure I gave her a night to remember, one she’d want to repeat real soon. When in reality, she probably took me to her bed and used me as her rebound guy, while I forgot to leave my heart outside of the door.

“Come on. I’ll be your wing man tonight, get you good and drunk, and find you someone to fuck. You’ll be a new man by morning.” Playboy Saint slaps my back, thinking meaningless sex solves everything. I hate to see the day a woman gets to him like Kallie has to me.

Duke stops our progress out the door. “Wait up, you two. I just got word from Pete Tate’s office about a cocktail party coming up.”

Tate’s the L.A. Vipers’ owner, the pro team that the Puckers feeds players into when they have roster spots to fill because of injuries and such. We’d all like a shot to play for them.

“The league’s owners are coming into L.A. for meetings soon. They want some players from each team to attend, rub elbows, and shit like that. Could be a good opportunity to get yourselves in front of these guys, put names to faces, promote your stats,” Duke explains. “You’re volunteered.”

Duke signing us up for this event has good timing. At this point, I’ll do anything to keep my mind off of Kallie. I don’t have any business taking on a serious

relationship, anyway. After years in hockey, I'm still not where I want to be professionally. I need to find that fire again, set aside any thoughts about a woman, and go for it all on the ice. As much as I try to reason with myself about my career, I know it'll be a long time before I forget Kallie.

### CHAPTER 7

#### BATH TIME

#### KALLIE

After holing myself up in this big house, Maryann, the food delivery service lady, has become my best friend. Whoever thought of an app where you could order Ben and Jerry's to be delivered to your home night and day is a genius.

“Trying Death by Salted Caramel tonight, huh, sweetie?” She says with a sympathetic smile, handing over the goods. Over her nightly ice cream drop off, we bond a little more. I learn that she's gone through a painful divorce after finding out her husband had cheated on her, and they were married for nineteen years.

It only confirms that I did the right thing and broke off my wedding to Jeremy. I saved myself the time and hassle of a divorce.

“I think tomorrow I'll try the Peppermint Twirl.” I nod and bring up the app on my phone and tip her an extra twenty tonight for speedy delivery and her pleasant smile.

“Oh, you know what goes good with that? Hot cocoa. Dunk a scoop of the twirl into the mug and pour the drink over it. The best. You won't regret it.”

“Good idea. Same time tomorrow. Thanks, Maryann.”

A few minutes later, I'm undressed and dipping into my bathtub, the custom one I

had installed, and the only reason I haven't left the house yet. Jeremy and I had just moved in together before I cancelled the wedding, hardly enough time to enjoy the one thing I really care about in this home.

The extra wide, extra deep tub curves to my back. The water temperature I can manage with just my big toe adjusting the knobs. Waterproof pillows allow my back and neck to relax in the bliss of the steamy water.

I've warned Jeremy to stay away, to give me space. Dad, too. I've lazed on the couch, depressed for a few days, doing nothing, mindlessly watching TV. I can't eat much or sleep. And I don't want to think. But each evening I draw a luxurious bath, and eat the pint of ice cream I order.

I don't know if this ritual will fix my problems, but it sure feels damn good when I'm done.

After moaning through several bites, I set the container aside and sink lower into the heated water. I definitely don't want to dwell on my father's threats regarding money. And I definitely don't want to think for a second about the dozens of texts from Jeremy making all sorts of empty promises to me to stay sober.

They've backed me to the wall, and I know I need to adult here and decide what to do. My indecision is my decision at the moment.

"Damn." I forgot to add tonight's bath bomb fizzy. The glass jar on the ledge of the bathtub is empty, and I glance at where I keep a plastic bin of them beneath the sink. I'm too lazy to get it now.

I let my thoughts wander back to Montana, to the small bathtub in my hotel room, made even smaller by Cody and his big body taking up most of it. But we made it work. I found a way to ride his big cock, his beautiful veiny monster, despite the



cramped space.

A tub like this, though, would be perfect for us.

Us. Last year, I thought of only me and Jeremy. It's funny how a one-night stand with a cowboy reminds you that there are plenty of fish in the sea, and more opportunities to create an us with someone new.

"Mm," I moan, caressing the insides of my thighs, recalling how Cody filled me up so perfectly. I dip my hand low, beneath the water's surface, splitting my seam. My pearl waits for me, throbbing at once. I've been too tired to do this, to take care of myself, but tonight, screw the world. I give myself permission to replay every second of what Cody did to me while I strum my clit.

I ride the wave of memories of our perfect night together, all I have of him. Is it too late to run back to Montana? Would Cody still be there?

With each of the six orgasms re-enacting in my head, my fingers dip deep inside of me, pumping, as my palm presses against my clit, over and over. I bring myself to crest fast, tumbling down the other side, water spilling slightly over the edge as I moan his name.

A door slamming downstairs echoes up to me, followed by Jeremy shouting, "Kallie?"

"Fuck," I whisper, trying to bring my breathing under control. I wipe the sweat from my brow and remain quiet. I can hear him going from room to room, then taking the stairs by two. He finds me a minute later, unfortunately.

"There you are." He appears happy to see me. I can't for the life of me understand why.

“What are you doing here? I specifically told you I need space.” I bring my knees to my chest and wrap my arms around them, denying him any view of me as he steps into the room.

“Enough. Quit ignoring me. We’re going to talk, regardless of whether or not you want to.” He brings out the stool I keep at the vanity and perches on it. His hand swipes the sponge from the bath tray. “Lean forward. I’ll do your back.”

I don’t budge, and I hate his imposition on my evening. This is my life and I’ll deal with it in my own time. “You know, a little warning about what Dad was doing might have been nice. You could have called me to tell me he’d given you the job. Hell, I wouldn’t have bothered coming back to Austin. You could have saved me a trip. Montana suited me fine.”

“Don’t even go there. I called and texted you all summer, none of which you answered.”

“I didn’t want to talk to you. We broke up, remember?”

“You broke off our wedding. We didn’t exactly break up.”

“There’s no difference in my mind.”

“There is a huge difference, and fuck Montana. Come on. I spent all summer in an outpatient program, getting better for you. I’m sober sixty-eight days and counting.”

Better for me? He acts like he deserves an award for this.

He spreads his hands on the edge, leaning in, getting that red-faced look when he’s upset, but at least his eyes aren’t bloodshot and dilated.

Being high never suited him. The drugs always made him an asshole. The way he'd treat me when he was under the influence—I deserve better, and I know it now.

“And how many days pussy-free?” Both a question and an accusation I throw into his face before I can stop myself.

He rears upright, running a hand through his hair. “Jesus, will you never forgive me?” But he doesn't exactly answer the question.

“You fucked my best friend and maid of honor. Why should I forgive?” I shout.

“Because I still love you, dammit.” He pounds a fist against the vanity, and we lock eyes in a stalemate. My heart quakes, my chest heaves, and I'm a little scared, but I refuse to show it, instead focusing on casting the most deathly glare at him.

Love? He can't mean it. I can't say it back. It wasn't just a fling with Marissa. They'd had an affair the entire year while I planned our wedding. After his injury in the last game he played, he needed physical therapy and massage, and all kinds of specialized treatments, possible surgery. She was his masseuse in his physical therapist's office, and their affair began there. Not to mention the ease with which she could get him prescriptions and access to drugs.

I knew she took drugs recreationally. She was always my wild, fun friend, such the opposite to my serious side. But this? It was the ultimate betrayal. The entire affair I blamed on her at first. Who does that? Having an affair with a man your bestie was engaged to? But Jeremy was totally at fault. He loved playing the victim, the injured hockey player, all too well. Pathetic.

I turn away from him and squeeze my eyes shut, fighting back the tears. The last thing I want to do today is cry in front of him. Except with eyes closed, images come flying back of the day I discovered the two of them.

My return from Montana isn't supposed to be like this. I'm supposed to be the one to take control, to call the shots, to work and prove that I don't need him or my dad running my life. I did not expect to find my ex sober and still professing his love, and my father to have given him my job.

When I open my eyes again, he's still there, face calmer. He reaches out a hand and presses my hair back off my face. I freeze in place. "Please, babe. Give me another chance. We were so good once. We could be again. Please."

How could he be stupid enough to think I'd welcome him back with open arms?

He grabs my bun, more than a handful of hair, and pulls my face closer to him. His other hand reaches up, circling my neck, pressing his thumb against my pulse point. My hands react on instinct, fingertips trying to peel his digits free. His lips land on mine. But I don't react or kiss back. I'm frigid.

I pray. Oh, God, I'm holding on by a string here. I need strength to get through this. Even an ounce of courage would help.

When he lets me go with a little shove, I don't say a word. He lets out a frustrated sigh.

"Fine. I'll give you fucking space, but you're not moving out. We are figuring things out between us, and that's all your father needs to know. You'll show up for work tomorrow, because we have shit to do and I need you there working beside me."

In other words, he doesn't have a clue how to be the marketing director. Does he even know the seven Ps of Marketing?

"And if I don't?"

“Don’t push me, Kallie,” his voice darkens, possessing an edge to it with a full warning I can’t ignore. “I’m working on my sobriety. Any undue stress can cause my relapse. Who knows what I’d be capable of under the influence again?”

He leaves me there in shock, lost in his veiled threats, and I stay in the water long after I hear his car pull out of the garage and drive away. I shrivel like a prune, shivering in the chilly water by the time I finally get out.

### CHAPTER 8

#### PHONE BUDDY

#### KALLIE

Jeremy's threats haunt me. I toss and turn all night long in the guest bedroom, dreading the alarm going off at seven in the morning.

Dixie would probably say I was stupid, a glutton for punishment, for still being here in Austin. I should have left the night I arrived. But I can't let him or Dad get away with this, and I need something out of this, too.

My mind drifts back, thinking how I'd been distracted with so many things to do with a week left until our wedding. Jeremy had become more and more miserable, just plain awful to live with, a fact which I'd attributed to his pain, and to his heartbreak at having to retire from playing hockey, the sport he loved. I had way too many excuses for his behavior.

One morning, we'd argued over something stupid, I can't even recall now what, and he shook me by the arms on my way out the door to do a final meeting with the caterer. But I pushed off and told him my future husband needed to stop being an asshole to me or else we'd have a pretty unhappy marriage. He apologized and promised once the wedding was over, he'd be back to his old self. But it was more than that, and I took the moment to call him out on his drinking and the drugs, too.

It ended up being the worst fight of our relationship. Me in tears, screaming at him to

get his shit together. Him, beet red, at one point his hand raising, looking like he'd hit me.

He'd often been a little rough with me, grabbing me by the arms, giving me a little shake during our arguments, but nothing I'd have called abuse at the time, just two people passionately arguing. That morning, though, when he looked poised to strike, I knew better. I had to leave. I finally saw it for what it was.

Something wasn't right. That wasn't the Jeremy I'd fallen in love with. The injury, the drugs, all of it changed him. But I was still the same, wasn't I? I always thought things would improve after the stress of the wedding was over, after we'd relaxed on the beaches of Saint-Tropez on our honeymoon. But would they really?

After the caterers' meeting, I'd driven back to the house so we could talk things out, hoping that we'd both calmed down enough. We could get counseling, he could get help, whatever he needed to get better. Whatever we needed to get over this together.

I never expected what I found when I got home. I entered the kitchen from the garage, dropping my purse on the counter, still holding my overly stuffed wedding planner in the crook of my other arm when moans hit my ears.

I peeked around the corner into the living room. My eyes grew wide at the sight of him fucking Marissa from behind, gripping her hips hard. Both fully undressed, he had her bent over the new white leather couch I'd recently purchased that was perfect for our living room. Perfect for us. Not them.

An open bottle of champagne stood on our new marble coffee table. I recognized the label as a bottle from the special shipment his family had ordered, particularly for the rehearsal dinner.

But next to the bottle was the fuse to my powder keg. White lines and a bottle of pills

sprawled across the marble.

Their party of two stole my life, love, hopes, and dreams.

“Leave her for me,” Marissa had said, to the sound of their skin slapping together.

“Fuck, baby, you know I can’t do that,” he’d groaned, leaning over her back, reaching for her neck and circling it with his big hands. She arched her back as he squeezed the air out of her while he pumped harder from behind. It shocked me, the intimacy of it, and how she let him dominate her so. He’d never done that to me in the throes of passion.

“I can’t go on being the other woman,” she croaked.

“Yes, you fucking can. You love sneaking around, getting high. What my cock does to your cunt. You can’t quit me. I refuse to let you, my little whore.” His knuckles turned white around her neck.

“Yes. Yes, I’m your little whore,” she squeaked. “Harder. Make me pass out.”

Watching them got me so heated, so pissed off, and fiercely jealous. I’d let out an anguished yelp and dropped my wedding planner. Pages and pages of notes and photos and swatches and all the stupid things that are supposed to make a wedding day so special for two people in love spewed across the floor to their feet, like a broken trail between me and them.

“Kallie!” He jerked upon seeing me, dislodging his dick from her and stumbling toward me like he was out of his mind so high. This was a nightmare. It had to be. I rubbed my eyes, but his red, stiff, glistening monster glared at me, the proof that what I saw was very real.



I left, and ran to my other friends, because isn't that who you go to when you're upset and hurt and find out your man had been cheating on you with your bestie? But apparently, my bridesmaids all knew of the affair. I was the last to find out, and I refused to speak to any of them since.

Humiliated isn't a big enough word for how I felt after that day.

At three in the morning, tired of reliving every horrible second of that day, I finally get up, kicking off the covers. Sleeping is pointless. I clean when I'm upset, and after I was away all summer, Jeremy hadn't exactly kept this place up.

Although why do I care? This house won't ever be the home of my dreams for us. Practicality wins out, though, because to sell it, it needs to be clean. I'll be damned if I lose money on my share of this selling price because he's a slob.

I vacuum the bedrooms and hallways upstairs. Two bags get filled with Gatorade bottles, takeaway boxes, and junk from the fridge.

I glare at the unkempt king size bed in the master bedroom. He and Marissa probably slept on it together. My stomach churns. Would I get in trouble with the fire department if I took all the bedding out and burned it?

All of a sudden, I attack it with a fierceness I've never known I possess, stripping the mattress down. After kicking out the screen, I toss the linens out the window to the lawn below.

Then I search under the master bathroom sink for cleaning supplies. I need strong stuff, bleach, anything to remove the stench of deceit and lies. I'm on a roll now. This house will be gutted.

"What a mess." There's so much junk in this cabinet, and I have no idea how it got

there. I madly start pulling out everything. Weird things, too, like discarded candy wrappers, pill bottles, a hammer, a bible. Maybe in Jeremy's drug induced state, he doesn't realize what the hell he's doing and stuffs things in here.

I come across the bin of bath fizzy's, but when I move it I see something pink.

"What the fu—" I grab it. My old phone, the one in a beautiful shade of frosted rose gold metal. I fall back to the floor, staring at it.

Jeremy had come home last year with a gift of a new white phone out of the blue. He said he was tired of me continuing to use my old pink phone that wouldn't even update to the latest operating system anymore, and he wanted me to have the latest gizmo. But I loved that phone, the color and the size, regardless of its age.

He'd pre-loaded the new one with all my favorite apps, along with sweet photo montages he'd made of us that would constantly play on the home screen. He'd taken my pink phone that night, laughing, and hid it away so I'd be forced to use the new technology.

Holding it to my heart like a long-lost friend, I begin to see all the little ways he'd attempted to control me over the years. All the things I thought he did for me out of love, I sit here and question if he had ulterior motives for every move he made.

My phone is out of power, but I find the old cord and charge it up. Within minutes, it turns on. I spend an hour on the floor listening to messages from old friends, from my bridesmaids with wedding questions, including some from Marissa who had planned our entire co-ed Las Vegas bachelor/bachelorette party.

What a party that was, and a fiasco. A wave of nausea overcomes me again as I recall her and Jeremy going off to score some drugs together on the strip at one point that night. They were gone forever, it seemed, something I wasn't pleased about, but our

group was wild that night, drinking to excess, partying it up Vegas style.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight, I can just picture them going up to our casino suite and messing around together, fucking and snorting something. God, I've been so blind.

I delete every message with a vengeance. Then I see I've had a dozen recent calls come in from a number in California. My mind is a mess and I can't think of who on earth would call me from there? They didn't leave a message, although my mailbox had been full.

I gasp when it hits me. "Oh! No way." Big D had said he lived in Los Angeles. Could that have been him? In my half-asleep state the morning he left me in Montana, did I rattle off my old phone number instead of my new?

My thumb hovers over the number. I take a deep breath and call it to see.

Six rings and I almost hang up until a message comes on.

"Cody here. Or, as some women like to call me, Big D."

I smile at the sound of his healthy ego and roll my eyes at it—although he has every right to claim that name. He is, in fact, heavily endowed.

"Leave your name and number. I'll call you when I can."

His voice has a deep, slight rasp to it with a chuckle, like he's someone who can laugh at himself. Good natured. Very likable quality.

Beep.

I swallow hard. What do I say?

Oh, hi. I'm the woman you gave six orgasms to in Montana—remember me?

But I don't say a thing, quiet on the line. He could be the type of guy who gifts a new woman every night with his talents.

No. He didn't seem like that. Talented, yes. But the way he gazed upon me and talked with me and made me laugh seemed like something more.

After Jeremy, though, what the hell do I know about men? How can I trust myself to choose a decent guy?

I hang up without leaving a message. A shroud of loneliness overwhelms me.

I could call Mom. But she and I haven't talked seriously about anything in far too long.

I call Dixie in Montana, but it goes to message, and she's probably sleeping. At least it feels good using my trusty pink phone again, like my hands miss the feel of the rose metal.

There's no one else to call, like I'm cast away on a deserted island. I'll befriend a soccer ball that washes up on the shore, and spend the rest of my days talking to it until I die of starvation and a broken heart.

My chest suddenly heaves, and shoulders shake uncontrollably. Tears fall faster than I can manage them. I'm so far down into the depths of despair, there's no way out.

I'm having a breakdown on the floor of the bathroom where Jeremy threatened me, in the house we were supposed to make a home, in the life that doesn't make sense for

me anymore.

When my phone suddenly dings, I yelp. A message comes in. Through watery eyes I can just make out that it's from Cody's number.

Cody: Hey.

With one word, one text, he's thrown me a lifeline, a preserver I can latch onto because I'm drowning.

I don't answer right away, but stare at it for a long time.

Cody: Kallie?

It's six in the morning for me, earlier for him, given the time difference between here to California. The number six makes me think of all the mind-blowing orgasms he gave me, and the way he left me in Montana so completely satisfied, saying how I deserved it.

What I don't deserve is to live in all this misery, thanks to Jeremy.

Fuck it. I wipe my tears and nose and text back.

Kallie: Hi.

Cody: I've been reaching out, but not able to get a hold of you.

Kallie: Things have been crazy here since I got back.

Cody: I thought you gave me a wrong number.

Kallie: No. Just an old one. How are you?

Cody: Fine. I'll be in Texas soon. Want to get together?

My pulse races. For whatever reason, the picture of Jeremy's hands around Marissa's neck comes to mind. I want that. Not with my ex, and maybe not exactly like that. But I want such wild passion, the feral, utter abandon of getting so lost with a man who loves on me so good.

I want Montana with Cody all over again.

But my life is so screwed up right now. It wouldn't be fair to Cody to invite him to take a ride on my hot mess express. Even if just for sex.

Kallie: If it's okay with you, I could use a friend. Can we just talk?

Cody: Sure. Tell me what's going on?

Exhaustion hits me, my brain suddenly too tired to spend the next hour telling him everything.

Kallie: Soon. Right now, I'm just glad to know you're here.

Cody: Reach out to me anytime. I'll be here waiting for you.

I'll be here waiting for you. My mouth hangs open to the floor. When was the last time a man said that to me? Never.

### CHAPTER 9

#### BACK ON TOP

#### BIG D

I usually hate modern technology, but my phone becomes my best friend all week, practically attached to me when I'm not on the ice. I wait, holding my breath for each text Kallie sends, each part of herself she shares, and counting the number of laugh emojis she gives when I send her funny memes in the mornings.

In our chats, I find out more about her barrel racing days. She likes that I go hunting every year with my family, and that we hunt with bows and arrows, not guns. We figure out that there could have been so many times our paths might have crossed in Montana when she was going to college up there. And I realize she has a healthy obsession with bathtubs.

The smile has returned to my face, zapping me with extra zip as I race around the ice during practice today. This cowgirl has me whipped and doesn't even know it. The guys notice, though.

"Okay, fucking twinkle toes. Dial it down a notch or two," Saint grumbles at me, his dark hair flying back off his face reveals a scowl. "I had a little too much to drink last night, and your smile is blinding my tired eyes."

I figure he must not have gotten enough female attention recently. He gets moody when he's not being worshipped by some new chick-of-the-week he's met. I worry

about him and his playboy lifestyle. Hell, I wouldn't even know what a settled down Saint would be like. He's a lot of fun to party with, though, often hosting get togethers at his house after the games with puck bunnies galore in attendance.

Yeah, he's a man-whore, and very popular with the bunnies. And by association, I have been as well, a lifestyle I'd give up willingly for my good cowgirl if things progress between us.

I rent a room above his garage, with a view of his huge house outside my window. I asked him once why the big house and why he doesn't take dating more seriously. He calls the house simply an investment and blames his parents and their nasty divorce for everything wrong in his life.

He has a sister, too, he mentioned one night when he was drunker than me. Despite the fact they all live in L.A., I know he spends holidays alone. I don't know the full story there, but they aren't close at all.

Makes me sad, because he's a really good guy and has become one of my best friends. I can count on him to have my back, just like Storm, Duke, Beau, and Tucker. We're all close friends and teammates, thanks to the Puckers team bringing us together.

"You're going to have to get used to my sunshine, Saint. Kallie and I are texting."

"I thought you said you had a wrong number for this chick?" Storm pipes up, skating with us.

"It works after all. We've been chatting every night. I'm back on top of the world. Soon I'll top Kallie once again, too." I pass by, wiggling my brows, attempting a fancy spin on my blades, but I wind up on my ass.



Storm busts out a laugh, pointing at me. Then he attempts a bunny hop, leaping from one skate, reversing backwards, and transitioning onto the other, teetering on his edges. As a big guy, all geared up in his goalie pads, he looks more like Humpty Dumpty about to take a great fall.

Duke skates up, growly as usual. “Quit fooling around, guys. We have work to do today. Or would you like extra drills?”

We fall in line and power through the rest of the the morning practice. After lunch, we watch videos on the Vancouver Ice since they visit to play us in a three-game streak starting tonight, but texts coming in from Kallie distract me.

She’s opening up to me more, complaining about a headache at work and having to do her boss’s job for him.

Cody: Sounds like a total douche canoe.

Kallie: (laughing emoji)

Cody: You should give him enough rope to hang himself. Maybe he’ll get fired.

Kallie: Actually, good advice, cowboy.

Cody: Where do you work? What do you do?

It’s a casual enough ask for two people getting to know each other. We’ve been flirting enough; I want to get to know her better. But she doesn’t text back.

The team finishes studying the videos and I hit the showers, but still no response from her after. On the way to Saint’s house, I decide to call her. I miss her voice. The way it turned husky during sex plays in my ear nonstop, and I’m ready to move things

along between us. What's the harm in a little chat while I'm stuck in Southern California traffic?

I dial her up, only it goes to voicemail.

"You've reached Kallie's phone. She's not here right now. Why am I talking in third person? Leave me a message." Her chuckle and sultry voice like sirens, only heighten my desire.

"Hey cowgirl, it's Cody. Just wanted to tell you a joke and put a smile on your face, darlin', so call me back."

Disappointing, but I figure she probably got busy. Later, Storm meets up with us at Saint's and we three hang out, watching a movie, until it's time to head back to the arena for the game. He brought with him a plate of cookies his grandmotherly neighbor, Edith, had baked for him. We gobble the homemade treats up. They hit the spot.

"Do you guys believe in love at first sight?" He asks out of the blue.

Saint chortles, and shifts his body away from us, facing the back of his couch. As usual, he skirts away from any talk about love or commitment.

I think about my rodeo queen and the first moment I laid eyes on her. Yep. I'd say I've been Kallie-fied ever since. But love at first sight? Lust, definitely. There's something going on between us because all I want is to dip my stick in her sweetness again. If only she'd call me back or text.

Since Duke married Phoebe, and they have cute kids, and Tucker is with Whitney and their son, you could say love is in the air down at the Pucker's arena. I've been at this game long enough, rattling around the semi-pros. I think I finally want more.

I want my own ranch in Montana, a stable full of horses, and a woman who can ride at dawn with me to see the sunrise over the indigo mountain peaks. Someone like my rodeo queen could be perfect to complete the picture.

Those dreams don't come cheap. It's time to cowboy up and push my career further. I need to claim what I want, and I have a good feeling it could be Kallie being my ride or die for life.

That sounds a helluva of lot like commitment only it doesn't scare me like it does Saint. I shrug my shoulders, getting back to Storm's question about love at first sight.

"Why are you asking? Do you think your neighbor's granddaughter saw your naked ass in the hallway of your apartment building and fell instantly in love?" I crack myself up laughing. There's a snort from Saint, too, only Storm scowls.

"I knew I never should have told you guys about the single most embarrassing moment in my life. Every time I see Edith's granddaughter, she looks at me like I'm a total pervert, like I have nothing better to do but roam the halls without my clothes on."

"Gotta turn on the charm, buddy. Make her see past your fine ass," I suggest, chuckling at his situation.

My phone wakes up, finally notifying me of a text incoming. I jump up and head out to the driveway and up to my room for some privacy, reading it along the way.

Kallie: I got your message. I liked hearing your voice. But this isn't fair to either of us to be anything more than friends.

What the fu—? I play it off, casually.

Cody: Got a thing against two friends talking on the phone?

Kallie: No. But...

Kallie: ...

I stare at those three dots a long time, waiting and wondering at what she could be typing, pacing in my room. Are Saint's instincts right, and she isn't that into me?

Kallie: Friendship is all I can give you right now, cowboy. I'm dealing with some stuff here and I just think talking by phone isn't something I'm ready for.

Okay. Reading through the lines, she's not putting me off, but saying she needs time. I've told her from the start, and I'll tell her again.

Cody: I'll be here when you're ready. But girl, it'd sure be great to see you again when I'm in Texas.

One more time together, six more orgasms, and I think I could have this cowgirl addicted to me. It occurs to me I could ask my agent to see if he can work a trade that sends me to San Antonio. I'd be closer to Austin, although I would hate to leave my buddies and the Puckers. Shoot. I know Kallie has an affect on me if I'm willing to go that far.

Kallie: I'm sorry. Just dealing with too much here.

Cody: Tell me what's going on.

Kallie: It's my ex. My dad. Things I have to figure out.

The dreaded ex. I hate knowing that she has one of those in her life.

Cody: Can't your ex take the hint you two are done?

Kallie: It's complicated.

I'd like to find this guy and let my fist make it a little less complicated for her, for us.

Kallie: It's too soon, cowboy. I'm sorry. We should stop this if we can't just be friends.

Cody: Kallie, don't go. Please. Friends. Fine. Just keep texting me.

There's a minute hesitation where I think she's gone, blocked me, done. Then she's back.

Kallie: That's all I can manage for now. Thank you. Promise we'll always be friends.

Cody: The best. If you need me, I'm here for you.

Something throughout our time together and all of our texts tells me she needs someone, like no one is there for her as she's going through whatever it is with her ex and father. They sound like complete assholes.

The alarm on my phone sounds and I swear under my breath. It's time to head back to the arena for pre-game warm-ups.

Cody: Hey, wish me luck for tonight.

I pack up my gear and wait for her to text back and ask what for so that I can tell her that I play hockey and would love to have her watch me play someday, only to hear the horn blaring in the garage downstairs from two impatient jerks. I run to the car, and it's a quiet ride with them as Saint drives us over in his Hummer. I don't hear

from Kallie again by the time my blades hit the ice.

The team plays sloppy at first, like we each have preoccupations tonight that make us edgy during the game, I can feel it. Thank fuck Vancouver has been on a losing streak so far this season so we still have a chance at winning. I especially don't care for a certain rookie on their team, Scott Sanderson, who thinks he's some kind of hotshot.

Unfortunately, I used to be like him long ago on the first team I played for out of college, the Minnesota Mammoths. Me and another new teammate, Kris Kringer, were so wet behind the ears, it wasn't even funny how we'd carry our big egos onto the ice. Yeah, we both got knocked on our asses good that first year. We had a lot to learn.

Tonight, with the way Sanderson chirps and irritates Storm in the net, he's looking for trouble. I have a rule as the enforcer on the team. No one messes with our goalie.

Storm's worked hard, and is staring at a perfect game, a shutout. But with seconds left, Sanderson gets the puck and breaks away at high speed right toward him. I hold my breath until Storm makes a beautiful save and the buzzer sounds. We win four to zero.

Sanderson's pissed, though, judging by the way he plows into Storm after the buzzer. The newbie has no idea he's just opened season on himself. My blood boils, conjuring the images that always get me mad enough to fight—thinking of the night my father was killed by an idiot driver, maybe topped with a little frustration about Kallie pushing me deeper into the friend zone. Probably also irked about whatever is going on between her, the ex, and her father.

That does it. Suddenly, I'm there in a flash, pounding on Sanderson's face.

“Welcome to the league, mother fucker,” I shout, as the refs pull me off of him. My

knuckles hurt but otherwise the kid didn't get a punch on me. His face will need some tending to by Vancouver's docs though. I've never actually hit a man off the ice, like the rink is my only boxing ring, the only place I allow myself to get pissed enough to fight.

"Fuck yeah, D. If you hadn't gotten to him first, I would have pummeled him," Saint says. He and I have been around the league enough years, sometimes rookies with egos are the worst to tolerate.

In the locker room, the team gets riled up from the hard fought win tonight. Music plays loud, we're talking smack and laughing. Then Duke's voice cuts through it all, calling Storm into his office.

Saint and I share worried glances. He's either getting chewed out or called up. We are still here waiting for him when he finally emerges. He's all smiles.

"Well, what's the news?" I stand and ask.

"The Vipers are looking for a new goalie. I could be going up to the pros, my friends." Nothing could strip a grin that big from his face.

"Yeah, buddy." I pick him straight up, a feat considering we're about the same size.

"We need to celebrate. I have some honeys coming over, and I stocked up the fridge with cold brews at home—" Saint starts.

"Rain check. I just want to go to my place and chill." He must notice the disappointment across Saint's face. "This could be it, the big time, the chance to prove I belong on a pro team. Going out, getting drunk, finding trouble—I can't risk anything that might prevent me from moving up."

We let him go call a car ride service to pick him up, and a huge part of me envies him. It's time to get my shit together as well, to strive for the dream of playing in the national league again. It's a dream that sort of died my first year as a rookie because of some unfortunate circumstances.

I got too involved in a certain situation, and it ended up costing me. Minnesota traded me away, I landed in the semi-professional league along with a bad reputation that I've been trying to fight my entire career. I've almost given up on hockey a time or two.

I won't make that mistake again. When we get back to Storm's place, I ignore the women and the alcohol and lock myself in my room above the garage. I think about my future in this sport, and this time I'll be smarter about things as I try to put my career back on track.



### CHAPTER 10

#### TALE OF TWO PHONES

##### KALLIE

Pink for personal. White for business. Both phones I now carry with me all of the time. But I have to be careful so Jeremy has no clue I'm in possession of my old phone again. Not that I care if he sees me texting Cody. It's my life. But after the way Jeremy threatened me, I'm wary.

I loved Cody's advice, and I put it into action right away. At work, I give Jeremy just enough help to get him by, but I leave him enough rope, enough blanks to fill on his own, that I hope he'll mess up in his work. Chances are Dad will finally see right through him for the fraud he is.

I formulated a plan and it's in full motion. I'm playing their game. Jeremy and Dad's. I'm here for now, gathering ammunition, waiting for the perfect time to strike. While I'm always cautious of Jeremy, fully aware now more than ever of just how dangerous he could be.

The night I found my pink phone and had a near breakdown on the bathroom floor, hearing from Cody for the first time boosted my spirit and filled me with hope again. He'll never know how much I needed to hear from someone at the point where I thought all was lost.

Just knowing he's there for me as a friend, an outsider, remotely removed from any

of my messy life makes all the difference. I can't help but grin as wide as ever when another text comes in from him. But to keep things only friendly I had to establish some rules with him. No phone calls, no photos, and no details about our lives, etcetera.

Cody: Hey. I hope your evening is better than mine. I'm at a stuffy cocktail party, and my suit shirt is tight as fuck. Guess I need to go up a size.

Imagining his fit body sprouting even more muscles in a suit flips my insides upside down. I've only ever pictured him in Wranglers as a sexy cowboy. Mm. I'd give anything to see him right now and almost break my no photos rule.

The thing is, tonight I'm in L.A., his territory. It's so tempting to let him know I'm here. To meet up and see what it might lead to, but I don't dare tell him. Not with Dad and Jeremy here with me as we attend the league's owners' meetings.

Kallie: Funny. I'm at an event I don't want to be at either.

Cody: What are you wearing?

Kallie: Little black dress.

Cody: Black lacy panties?

Kallie: Sure. ;) A friendly pair.

Cody: I'm sorry I asked now. Makes me want to break all your rules.

Kallie: If it helps, they're really granny panties, not lace.

Cody: Right. What do you say we leave and fly somewhere tonight to meet up? I'll

buy the tickets, no matter the cost. Even if it's just to meet, grab a coffee together, then hop back on planes for home. (Wink emoji)

Kallie: You really are trying to be a rule breaker tonight.

We're hedging out of friendship territory with this chat. I yearn to see him again, but somehow I think a coffee meetup to him is code for doubling the number of orgasms he gave me the first time.

Not that I'd mind. My panties are wet just thinking about him. But we're only supposed to be friends.

Cody: Pick somewhere in the world. Anywhere.

Kallie: Montana.

Cody: Let's go.

Kallie: Be serious.

Cody: I'm not joking.

Kallie: We can't.

Cody: Why not? What's holding you back?

Kallie: Friends, remember?

What is holding me back from exploring things with Cody? My gut tells me he's not the kind of guy to treat me like Jeremy does. But I was so mistaken about him, I'm probably wrong about Cody, too.

We'll always have Montana, but that's it. I need to keep that one special night in it's own bubble, away from every ugly thing I'm dealing with at home. I can't let Jeremy hurt me—but if he found out about Cody, I fear he'd hurt him, too.

Cody: Damn, woman. I just want you to know you're killing me keeping us in the friend zone.

Kallie: I'm sorry.

Cody: It's fine. I'll deal. But I you need to know that I think about you all the time. I'll be here waiting for you when you're ready.

All the time? My heart squeezes. I'll be here waiting... He has no idea what his words do to me.

How I wish I could leave Austin and all my troubles behind, and in time I will. Very soon. Right now I don't have room for fantasies. I have real life to deal with.

I sigh, my heart heavy in my chest, and I stuff the phones into my black designer satin clutch, the one with the pave diamonds across the lip. It's just big enough for two, and I leave my hotel room. Once I'm in the elevator, I smooth a hand down my little black dress, eyeing my reflection in the gleaming elevator walls of the classic Beverly Hills Hotel, knowing Dad will hate this ensemble.

I've heard him complain on more than one occasion to my mother over the years about her choice of clothing. Guarantee his first words will be, "Couldn't you have worn something with color?"

Maybe, but I don't feel like it. I feel like attending this reception in Los Angeles wearing black that reflects my mood because this is more like a death sentence.

To make matters worse, Jeremy came along on this trip, too. At least I insisted on separate hotel rooms. No matter how much he's tried to talk me into rooming together, and no matter how much he believes we're trying to work things out between us.

We're taking things slow. Very slow. Even slower than a snail's pace, he grumbled at me yesterday. But that's all part of my plan, to make him think we're trying a tiny bit, just until I can get away.

We aren't fucking, and never will again; I stiffen at his touch and turn my cheek at his every attempt to kiss me.

After his cheating, all his lies, and his threats I'd be a fool to jump back into what we had before. But a very tiny part of me cries for the life I thought I'd have with him. We had three good years, before the bad times. He'd been my first love. I've had to learn to let go of that fast, easier now that I can see him for who he really is.

My mind has been a jumbled mess since I returned to Austin.

I close my eyes and inhale, trying to calm the anxiety rising within. Just breathe, girl... The words come to mind, only not in my voice, not in Jeremy's, but in Cody's. The exact way he'd whispered it in my ear as I came for the fifth time and completely shattered underneath of him in my hotel room in Montana.

A thrill works down my spine. My body and my brain have not yet let me forget our night together. He was funny, and sexy, and everything I needed in a rebound man. I hated that he had to be the one I drew into my mess. No, I didn't hate the sex, and I didn't hate him. I hated that one night was all I could give him.

The bell dings and the doors open on Dad's floor. Before he steps in, his cool gray eyes glance at me, up and down. He enters with a disapproving Humph. "We're late."

He frowns, otherwise I'm certain he'd order me to go up and change.

He's tolerating me. Could this be progress? I won't get my hopes up.

We ride down together in silence. There's so much I'd love to unload upon him, starting with my disappointment that he'd given Jeremy my marketing job. Or how about my disdain for his love of money and not for his daughter. I want so badly to ruin his impression of Jeremy who he's placed on such a high pedestal. But I bide my time, being patient. There will be the right time for that.

The elevator door opens on the ground floor, and Dad holds his elbow out. I take it, because this is all I am to him. The pretty show piece on his arm he can parade through the lobby. His sweet daughter who he can proudly introduce to the other owners at the party, while he berates me in private for wearing a simple black cocktail dress.

This used to be my mother's job, being at his side, until she fucked up. Too much to drinking and she'd embarrassed him at a gala two years ago. She refuses to get the help she needs for her alcoholism and Dad won't do anything for her, just lets her spend his money and hide at home.

Dad's cut from old cloth. He cannot stand women in business. Team PR is an important job, one I take seriously, gaining experience so that I can find a new job soon, but anytime he has something to gripe about or a new directive, he gives it to Steve, my assistant. What am I even doing? Why do I keep expecting Dad to change with the times?

Jeremy spots us, leaving some players he's talking to in the lobby. The local teams sent guys to attend this reception tonight, and he probably knows them all. He spent fifteen years in the league before he got injured and news that he could never play again. Before he got hooked on pills to take the pain away.

He joins us, kissing my cheek when he reaches my side because I turn away so he'll miss my lips. Then he shakes Dad's hand, pretending everything is fine between us. "The Vipers sent some players over. I've had my eye on one of their rookies. His stats are impressive. I'll introduce you later."

"Perfect. Be sure to tell the coaches next week about him." Dad gives him an approving nod and steers me into the ballroom. Jeremy is on my other side. I'm sandwiched between them like something they own, not a woman to respect and admire. I know the rookie's stats, too. I know hockey, since I used to play through school, and I've been around my father's business my whole life.

But I'm a woman. He doesn't respect that.

I sigh and put on a fake smile and play right into my role. But not for long. I'm going to break free of the both of them as soon as I figure out a new job, and a new place to live, and how to get away without Jeremy following me. Or hurting me.

I guess I'm vindictive that way. My mother gave up, sacrificing her life, letting Dad railroad over her. Not me. I have fight left in me. Jeremy and Dad fucked with the wrong modern girl.

An hour later, my cheeks hurt from my frozen, professional smile as the dutiful daughter. Funny how I'm crying on the inside despite it.

When Jeremy trails off to speak with old friends, I excuse myself and make for the bar. I leave my empty glass there and order another, ignoring Dad's one-drink limit demand. With a fresh Long Island iced tea in hand, tall and strong, I slowly meander back.

I eye Dad speaking with a few players as I approach. With tight bodies in suits, holding beers, they tug at their ties around their necks because they'd probably rather

be on the ice instead of a stuffy reception like this.

Leave the business side of things to the suits. Leave the team on the ice to win the games. That was Dad's motto I recall him saying the entire time I grew up. Funny how Jeremy broke his rule, now working for him.

Dad glares at me slurping through the straw, so I focus on my drink as he introduces us. "Here's my daughter, Kallie. Honey, this is Miles St. James and um, sorry son, I didn't catch your name."

"Cody." That deep voice... So familiar. Like the one belonging to the man who had called me good girl as my breath left my quaking body for the 6th time one night in Montana.

My eyes snap up to the tallest of the two, a gorgeous, tanned, blue eyed man whose body I'd been intimately familiar with for one night. A cowboy I never expected to see here at a hockey event.

It's him. Here.

Cody plays hockey? The last I'd seen of him, he wore ass-hugging Wranglers, well-worn cowboy boots, and a huge silver belt buckle. He was my perfect cowboy lasting several seconds on a bull. And now he's...

He's staring at me like I walked out of his latest wet dream, along with a side of disbelief.

I can't speak and neither can he, at first. I recognize the same blue sparks in his eyes that he'd held on me while we danced at the bar, and I fall for him, tumbling into some sort of dizzying spell of cowboy and cowgirl lust—until Jeremy reaches my side and breaks the spell.



“Ah, this is my future son-in-law, Jeremy Whittaker.”

At Dad’s words I die, hating his presumption that I’m still Jeremy’s fiancée. Cody’s eyes fall into darkness, squinting, darting them between us.

“You two might remember Jeremy, leading scorer of all time, playing for my team, the Austin Capitals? Now he’s head of marketing for my organization and I couldn’t be prouder.” My father boasts. Fuck him.

Cody’s demeanor turns to ice; I can feel the cold cracking and expanding from his chest. But it’s not exactly directed toward me. There’s a strange look, a familiarity, that passes between he and Jeremy.

Oblivious to the silent war waging between my ex and the cowboy, the other guy, Miles, reaches out and shakes his hand. “I saw you play in the finals for the cup your first year in Austin...”

I don’t hear another word, watching Cody huff and stride out the doors. My heart goes with him. Whatever possess me, I must talk with him.

As the three men get embroiled in hockey talk, I make an excuse to get away. “Um, I think I see a friend over there. I’ll be back.” I rush off, darting through the crowd in the opposite direction as fast as I can so neither Dad nor Jeremy can follow. I find the exit at the end of the ballroom, and, with no view of the two men behind me, I rush out to the hall doubling back to the lobby, searching for any sign of Cody.

I take out my pink phone to text him, but one from him is there, waiting for me to read it.

Cody: We need to talk, and it’d better be in person. Find me at the lobby bar.

### CHAPTER 11

#### THE STAIRWELL REUNION

##### BIG D

How can this beauty be so blind? What the hell is Kallie doing with Whittaker? He doesn't deserve her.

I feel duped by her, thinking about Montana. She said she was getting over her ex. Her ex is that guy and now they're engaged? What are the odds?

If this is a game they're playing, it isn't my thing.

With an eagle eye, I keep watch for her, trying to calm my frustration. I finally spot her as she steps into the lobby bar of the hotel. She approaches me where I'm seated in a corner.

Damn. All this time I've remembered her as that cowgirl I met. But not a trace of the country girl I connected with in Montana is left, replaced by a womanly figure, stunning in a black gown, spike heels, hair in a tight knot, diamonds at her throat. She looks like a very fuckable million bucks.

I like that about her, the duality, but my head would never be able to shake the memory of my rodeo queen, as if that's the real Kallie she shared with me. Not this dressed-up version.

“Hi, Cody, ” she says, forming her sexy red painted lips around my name. I can’t stand to be this close to her and not take her over my shoulder and carry her away from all of this pretentiousness like a possessive, selfish bastard.

Before she can sit down, I rise and guide her gently by the elbow.

“Come with me,” I say, and she doesn’t argue. The sparks fly from this one touch, but I ignore them. We don’t say a word until we’re in the stairwell. It’s as closed off, hidden, and as far away as we can be under the circumstances.

“What the fuck are you doing with Whittaker?” I raise my voice as soon as the door closes, not intending to scare her, but out of frustration.

She cowers a little against the wall, a strand of auburn hair falling across her eyes, and I immediately regret my tone.

“I’m not with him,” she retorts, taking a swipe at the lock of hair.

“But Mr. Campbell said?—”

“My dad’s a misogynistic asshole who thinks he can force me into staying with Jeremy. You’re a hockey player?”

I ignore the look on her face because I can’t interpret if she thinks that’s a good thing or not. “You can’t be with him, Kallie. I know him. That guy isn’t right in the head.” I point fingers at my own brain to emphasize.

She blinks several times. “How do you know him?”

There’s so much I want to talk with her about. I dreamed of this moment when we’d finally be face to face someday and everything we’d say to each other. Never

thinking I'd need to reveal this part of my past so soon. I must warn her about him.

I breathe in deep and scrub my mouth and chin stubble. "When I made it to my first team in Minnesota as a rookie out of college, the coach assigned Whittaker to mentor me. They always pair rookies and experienced guys together to help along with their development being new to the national league."

"You two were teammates," she groans.

"Not for long. I realized right away what a prick he was. I hated him. But mostly, I hated the way he treated his girlfriend at the time, Zoe. I saw him cheat on her on more than one occasion at after-game parties. She was a sweet chick, and I got to know her a little, just as friends, until one night I spotted fresh bruises on her arms when she mindlessly pushed her sleeves to her elbows. She confided in me he'd gotten too rough with her in an argument, and often did. Scared her, but she loved him and would not leave him, no matter how much I tried to convince her."

Kallie gasps, her hand flying to her chest. And that's how I know. He's a repeat offender. My fists ball up. A man who chooses to rule over a woman weaker and smaller than him is no man at all. I'd love to show him the way we cowboys deal with men who don't respect the female gender.

"So I'd had enough, and told the coach about him. But Jeremy retaliated and told the coach I was taking drugs. Claimed he had proof. Only it backfired on him. We both ended up traded."

She slowly nods. "Must have been a PR threat for Minnesota. Teams hate when their players embarrass them with anything less than a squeaky clean image."

"He got the better end of it though since he landed in Austin, still playing professionally, while I got sent down to the semi-pros. I've had to fight every fucking

day of my hockey career to work hard and prove myself against the nasty lies he's spread about me over the years to anyone he can in the league. The guy set me up with a reputation I didn't deserve. I never did drugs, not once."

She holds her sides, nostrils flaring, jaw locked, looking about to cry. Or pissed, probably both. I want to reach for her and — Wait.

She knows I live in L.A., yet she shows up here and doesn't tell me she's in town? Talk about a stab to the heart. Now I'm the one who is pissed. My lungs deflate like she knocks the wind out of me. Here I've been fooling myself into thinking we could be more than friends someday.

But dammit, my brain is all befuddled because she looks too good. Better and even more beautiful than I remember, although I've had no trouble picturing her ass in tight jeans riding in a saddle every night in bed with my hand stroking my rod.

Her lips red and full, pouting, do every single fucking thing for my cock. Mm-hmm. He suddenly stands stiff at attention in a second flat. He'd win if this were a rodeo competition.

Will I win the girl again at the end of the night like I did last time I saw her in Montana?

But she didn't bother telling me she'd be in the city tonight, and that fucking hurts.

I turn in the stairwell away from her, pointing my big D in the other direction, hands on hips, trying to breathe and get a grip on the situation. But I need to know the facts.

I swallow hard, steeling myself for the answer to my next question. "Tell me right now. Did that mother fucker ever hurt you?"

She remains quiet behind me. Likely too scared to admit the truth.

“If he dares ever hurt you again, he’ll have me to deal with. I swear it, Kallie,” I vow through clenched teeth, focused on the wall of stairs ahead of me so I don’t find that fucker and ram my fist down his throat. I’ve grown considerably bigger than him, and given the injuries he’s sustained that ended his hockey career, he’d be at a complete disadvantage.

Suddenly, her arms wrap around me from behind. Her shoulders shake against my back, leaning on me to support her weight.

Fuck me royally. Is Jeremy’s shit all these “complications” that she told me she’s been dealing with?

“He works for your dad, right?”

“And I work for him,” she cries. I think I got the full picture now, enough clues to know this is indeed one fucked up mess.

I soften, turn, and lift her in one swift move. Her dress shifts up, arms hugging my neck. I sit down on a step and hold her tight as she straddles me. Rocking her back and forth, I assure her with soft whispers.

“I got you, cowgirl. I’m here for you.” Hot tears fall from her eyes, and wet my hair, until finally, her cries subside into sobs. But I have to know. “Why didn’t you tell me you’d be in L.A. tonight?”

“I’m not alone. Jeremy and Dad scrutinize my every move. I didn’t want to risk involving you anymore than necessary. It’s my mess to figure out.” She sniffles.

“Dammit, girl, I’m so fucking involved now. It isn’t even funny. So do me a favor

and don't shut me out."

"I've been trying to deal with this on my own?—"

"You don't need to be so brave anymore, darlin'. I'll make sure you're okay. Let me in. I could take such good care of you."

"What if he finds out about you and hurts you?"

I snort. "I'd like him to try, just so I can put him in his place."

The beauty in my arms tightens her hold on me, burying her face into my neck. "That's asking you to be so much more than just friends."

Then her lips brush my ear lobe. Joined soon by her tongue and kisses and sucks and nibbles on my neck. Her tiny moans into my ear threaten my last hold on sanity.

My cock, like a steel rod, hasn't deflated yet. He unabashedly jerks between us, trying to snake his way into her body if he could, no matter how much I try to control the situation in my pants.

"You keep kissing me like that, darlin', and we'll leave the friend zone far behind," I warn.

"Cody." I growl at my name on her lips. "Fuck, Cody, I need you." Her plea feathers into my ear.

I bring my hands up and cup her cheeks, forcing her gaze right into my eyes. "You have me, girl. I can hardly believe it myself, but you do. Don't you know? From the first kiss, you've completely owned me."

“I have?”

“I don’t know how it happened, but you’ve branded me. Ask my teammates. I’ve been a mess since Montana. I’m one hundred percent Kallie-fied and owned by you.”

“Kallie-fied. I like that.” A glimmer enters her half-lidded eyes, one corner of her lips turns up in a soft curve.

Our eyes don’t shift, but her ass does, as she squirms against my groin, adjusting along my cock. Her clit must have found satisfaction at just the right spot, given how she whimpers and repeats the move, grinding harder and harder on me.

“Fuck yeah, cowgirl, get yourself off on my cock. You own that, too. One hundred percent all beef, thick and juicy, all yours.” I lean back, not caring how the stairs cut into my back. My hands circle her waist, and I rock my hips in time with her.

“I like the sound of that,” she chuckles and bites her lips, but in the next breath holds back a moan, moving on me so fucking beautiful.

The only thing better would be her whipping out my cock and riding it, right here and now. But we’re in a dang stairwell, taking so many risks as it is. I’ll take them all with her, steal from the time she has to be with those other assholes as much as I can.

They don’t deserve her. I need to convince her to leave them. Why does she even put up with them? All questions for later.

“I can’t believe you’re here. You’re so fucking beautiful, Kallie.”

“Mm. My sexy, dirty cowboy.” Breathless, she leans her hands behind her on my knees, letting her head loll. The arch of her back, tilting her tits skyward, her chest heaving, is a sight for this poor cowboy’s eyes.



I flip her dress up for a view of her, and there they are. A friendly little pair of lace panties. The way her pussy in the sheer black fabric dances against my groin, I'm whipped. There's no going back to just friends after this. My hands smooth up her body, skimming over her nipples, wrapping gently around her neck. I need her naked again.

"You feel this, baby? Feel my cock? That's all for you. I haven't had another woman since Montana because you've ruined me for anyone else." Ah, shit. It occurs to me that maybe she and Jeremy... Since she returned to Austin...

I paste my eyes shut, as jealousy and rage build within me. Then her hands are on my cheeks, forcing my eyes on hers, like she can read my thoughts.

"Hey, cowboy. The only dick I've had is yours. In the bathtub when I think of you fucking me so good—it's you, every single time." She reassures me, and starts to bounce on my cock like she can't hold back any longer, her arms circling my neck for balance.

"Do you touch yourself, thinking of me?" My hands on her waist urge her faster and harder, up and down. I'm so close to busting a nut in my pants.

"Yes. Yes," she moans as her legs shake.

"Are you a good girl, making yourself come thinking of me fucking you so good?"

"Every. Single. Time." Her words escape in pants.

"Because my rodeo queen deserves a nice big D to ride, doesn't she?"

"Oh God." She rocks on my lap so wildly, her hair falls down in a mass of auburn curls, flying about her shoulders like there's a breeze in the stairwell. "Yes, Cody!

Yes!”

I glue my hand to her mouth, preventing further screams as her body convulses. Her beauty radiates, coming undone on top of me. Through my clothes her wetness seeps onto my pants, soaking me, but I don’t care what huge spot she leaves behind. Nothing could stop this now.

No one will stop us now.

I want to hold her, as she comes down from her high, but she moves quickly between my legs, gasping for air, and reaching for my zipper.

With every ounce of willpower I have, I stop her progress and grab her wrists, bringing us both back to standing. I’ll pay for it with the bluest balls ever tonight.

“Not here, baby. Ditch the ex before he hurts you. Text them you have a headache and leave with me now. Come home with me tonight.”

“My hotel room is closer. We can talk and...” Her eyes fall to the bulge in my pants. She makes a seriously valid point, and I’m too wound up to argue the pros and cons of staying in this hotel.

A minute later, we both run up several flights of stairs to her floor. Breathlessly, we dash down the hall to her room. The pull and promise of her pussy is too strong, even though I know I should get her as far away from Whittaker as possible.

### CHAPTER 12

#### SIX AGAIN

#### BIG D

No sooner does Kallie quickly fire off a text to Whittaker and her father, complaining of a headache, than my lips are on hers, my hands taking her frosty white phone and tossing it aside. I don't break our kisses, as I run her back up to the hotel door, reaching down to make sure it's locked. If either of those fuck wads dare to knock to check on her later, they'll have me to deal with.

Spiked sweet tea lingers on her tongue and I steal the taste; I can't get enough. I trade moans with her, my hands skimming her sides. Then I force myself to pull away a little, slowing the pace, because I could abso-fucking-lutely take her hard and fast right now to relieve the burning ache in my balls.

What I really desire is a repeat of Montana, a night where I'm satisfying her again and again, in every way I know how.

"You look good in my lipstick," she chuckles as we pause, wiping the red from around my lips with the pads of her fingertips.

"How many?" I ask, brushing the hair from her face.

"What? Lipstick shades?" Her eyelashes flutter up at me, confused.

“Orgasms, cowgirl. How many tonight?”

A grin graces her face. “You mean like last time? I’d say you set the world record for orgasmic finishes.”

“Hell yeah, I did. You pretty much passed out on the final one. So would you like a repeat, baby? Six? Hm?” I lean a hand above her head on the door, while my knuckles skim along her jaw line. I press a rather chaste kiss to her forehead. There won’t be many of those tonight.

“A little goal-oriented, aren’t you?”

“When it comes to your happiness, Kallie, always.”

She gasps, staring up at me like she can’t believe I’m for real. “Please don’t say things like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t trust my judgement right now when it comes to men. I’d like to believe every word you say. But can I?”

I hate how that asshole Whittaker put these doubts in her. “You can trust me, Kallie.” I step further into her suite and slip my sports coat off, draping it over a chair. She got me so hot in the stairwell, I sweat so bad in that thing. I’ll need to get it dry cleaned before I can wear it again.

Next comes my tie; my fingers tug at the stupid knot. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying I’m perfect. I’m sure there’s going to be things I do that irritate you sometimes. I’m only human.”

“But you see, I once thought Jeremy was—” She stops, taking in the pained expression on my face hearing his name on her lips. Shaking her head, she approaches and takes over the removal of my tie.

Once unknotted, she slowly, seductively removes my tie inch by inch from around my neck, exchanging smoldering glances with me. “Now I know for sure, he’s not the one for me. But my judgement feels a bit off. So give me some time to adjust, please.”

She plays with my tie, reaching up and putting it around my neck again, only this time she keeps hold of both ends. She uses it to tug me down to her. Our lips meet, tongues dancing lazy circles like we have all the time in the world, like wolves won’t soon be knocking on our door.

“I’m here. Not going anywhere, and I can be a very patient man for you, Kallie. All I ask is that you don’t fuck around with him. Or any man for that matter. Only me.”

“Exclusivity? That works both ways. Even though there’s too many miles between us. I won’t stand for cheating, not after what J?—”

“I’m not him. I’ll do whatever you need for me to prove to you that you don’t have to doubt me or fear me. Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

“Tell you?” She arches a brow with a growing mischievous smile. Then she struts over to the bed, taking my tie with her. She sits and leans back, crossing her toned legs. “I like being the one in control for once. Unbutton your shirt at the wrists then tackle the buttons on your chest.”

Okay, I like where we’re headed now. My fingers work through all the buttons. I fling my shirt off and perform a funky slide dance, crossing the room to her, snapping my fingers to a tune in my head. It thrills me at the way she giggles. Her eyes crinkle

at the corners as she follows along every ridge of my moving muscles.

“Shoes and pants next,” she dares, biting her curved bottom lip.

I follow through and fling those off to the side, standing before her in only my black tight boxers.

“Want this off, too, baby?” I snap the waistband.

She nods, eyes gleaming, swallowing hard at the size of my bulge. It grows even more, dying to know how cozy it can be in her throat. I keep close watch on her face, catching the moment she sees my big cock, her breath hitching.

He practically bucks like a bull out of the chute when I reveal him. Judging by the amount of pre-cum pooling in the tip, he’s plenty mad since he was left out of the stairwell party. While it was fun for me to get Kallie off with just my hard rod in my pants, not so much for my big buddy here.

Her tongue darts out and licks her lips. So I give her a show. I reach down and fondle my balls, more than a full handful of them. Then I round my grip on my rod and slowly work the shaft up and down. A growl quakes my chest when I caress my thumb over the head, spreading the liquid there.

“God, you’re well endowed,” she whispers, staring at him as if under the spell of me. “No wonder the name Big D.”

“Actually, the name started because I play defense. But yeah, I’m also blessed with the best beast God could offer a man.” I chuckle and I’m not exaggerating. My nickname really isn’t about my ego but just plain facts. I’ve got a great head, in a perfect mushroom shape, topping a huge, thick, veiny monster.

I know it. Every woman who has seen it knows it. But now, Kallie will be the only one to possess it. He belongs to her. I need her to believe that.

“It’s my turn, cowgirl. Take that dress off, toss me your panties and spread your legs,” I demand, and I stop stroking because I’m too close to the edge as I carefully study her every move.

With graceful lines, at first, she treats me to quite the show, dancing out of her garments. The view of her bare naked before me stunning, she tosses her panties at my head.

I wear them like a hat and make a silly face at her because I’m goofy like that sometimes. She lands in a fit of laughter, holding her sides. I like the way we can have fun together. I think she needs more of that in her life and I’m happy to bring it.

My dad always said he fell for Mom because of how they could see the humor in the world every day together. They did up until the day he was taken from us too soon. I swear with Kallie, I won’t take my days with her for granted. I just need her to be mine.

My cheeks ache, lips stretched so much, and I finally bring the panties to my nose, inhaling her sweet scent. Since the first time in Montana, my nose has failed to work properly, like nothing will satisfy but the scent of my cowgirl. Now, it’s back in proper condition with one whiff of her.

She jumps ahead of my next order, spreading her legs, running her hands from her breasts down to the apex of her thighs. My hungry eyes glue there, eyeing how she pleases herself. Once her fingers pump into her pretty pussy, I’m done. Gone. She’s it for me.

“Keep getting yourself off, baby.” I lodge myself between her legs, my cock at her

mouth, and issue my final command. “Suck it. But I warn you, I won’t last long this first time.”

“Not even eight seconds?” Her cheeky grin teases me. I have no choice now.

“Dang, you just have to throw out that challenge, don’t you?”

“Well, you are the champion.” She kindly reminds me, still the dare in her sparkling eyes.

I find my pants, retrieve my phone from the pocket, and set the stopwatch app for 8 seconds. “For you, I’ll give it my best shot.”

“Ready?” She asks, finger poised over the start button, mouth at my head.

“Yep. Let her rip.”

She starts the timer and opens wide. My observe my head disappearing inside of her warm mouth. While the stop watch tracks the seconds ticking by, I do what I’ve always done, counting in my head.

One Mississippi.

“Mmmm.” Her sound vibrates me, tickling my skin. Around my head, her tongue swirls in circles. I hold on for this ride with every fiber of my being.

Two Mississippi.

She inhales several inches of me until my head breaches the back of her throat and holds there. My eyes shut on the view of her lips wrapped around my cock or I’ll bust for sure.



Wait. Was that three or four Mississ?—

Fuck it, I'm losing track of the time as Kallie treats my cock like a king. Do I care if I lose this once?

Hell no. My hands wrap gently around her neck, holding her still as I pulse into her throat.

“Fuck, baby. Yeah.” Faster, my hips jerk spontaneously in and out. I let out a long groan and peer down, only to find tears in her eyes, her hands resting on my wrists. I pull out. “Oh shit, is this okay? Did I hurt you?”

“Don't stop. I liked it. More. Harder,” she pleads with a ragged voice.

“Really? Are you sure?”

Her head bobs, hands reach around me, gripping my backside like she urges me to continue. I resume the position, holding her at the neck, so turned on at the beauty of her taking me deep and fast. I last way past the timer going off.

The champion, always.

I roar coming hard, spilling every drop down her throat. My body shakes and jerks, mind spinning out of control, lost in bliss. So much that I almost cry out the words on the tip of my tongue, I love you, cowgirl.

Um, yeah. Something tells me that'd be moving a little too fast for her at this point. I don't even understand why I'm moving this fast. There's just something between us I can't ignore. So I hold back for now.

Guess I'm not surprised though. When I see what I want I know it. And, given the

Whittaker connection, the fact that I'm compelled to do all I can to keep her safe from him, everything feels right. I'm meant to be with her, and protect her.

I slide out of her mouth. "Mm. Thanks for that."

"You're quite welcome." She falls back on the bed and stretches like a black kitty cat, preening like she's more than satisfied.

"Don't even think about dozing off. This is just the beginning." I gather her in my arms and make for the bathroom, not surprised at all what I find. Her suite is elegant in an old world style, but this bathtub is built for two. "Wow. You really do have a thing for these. Do you book your hotels based on the bathrooms?"

"Maybe." Her sly smile with a shoulder pump is nothing short of adorable. I think there's a side of Kallie who is a little spoiled. I've heard a few stories about her dad, one rich fucker. She's more than the Montana country girl I took her for. Can I keep up with her on my semi-pro pay?

There are plenty of other ways to ensure she's happy, none of which involve the zeroes in my bank account, all of which have to do with my package. That's all I have to offer her. Speaking of, my big D jerks to life again. I set her down, and reach for the handles of the tub. The water flows and it's twice as big as the one we shared in her Montana hotel room.

She runs a hand along the edge as if appreciating its beauty. She pumps something liquid into it. It transforms into a sea of fruit-scented bubbles.

"I've been looking forward to soaking here all day," she says on a sigh.

"I'll bet you have. Get in." But first I snake my hand through her curls and bring her mouth to mine, kissing her lips from corner to corner, instantly regretting the morning

coming too soon, and the minute I have to leave her once again.

### CHAPTER 13

#### brEAKING THROUGH CLOUDS

#### KALLIE

Dad cuts me with his razor-sharp, intense stare. His long drawn-out sigh pitches higher than the hum of the aircraft.

“Where’s your man?” He hates having to wait. Jeremy is late for our takeoff from LAX on the company’s private jet.

I’d love to tell him my cowboy is still in my hotel room. As a small reward for every mind-blowing orgasm Cody gave me last night, I let him sleep in so he could take his time leaving before checkout. As for me, I had to leave early because Dad doesn’t know how to relax and he hates L.A.

I didn’t sleep a wink. If Cody and I weren’t fucking, we were holding each other tight, talking about my life. Cody had listened, questioned everything, then begged me to give up this fight before I got hurt.

“I can handle this. I’m a big girl and I’ll be careful,” I’d retorted.

“I know that. But I’d feel better being there to protect you,” he’d said, and my heart melted like I was some lost princess who’d finally found her knight. “Stay with me here, Kallie. We could be so good together, and I think you know that by now.”

He nuzzled my neck, holding me closer, and worked his hand down between us. I happily opened my legs, giving him full access to my clit for another ride. My fifth? Sixth? I'd lost count. We proved our night in Montana wasn't just a one-time thing, not just an anomaly.

Yes, we are in fact so good together.

"Ahem." Dad clears his throat. My cheeks flush.

"Oh, um, I'll text Jeremy. I had a headache last night, and he stayed in his own room," I explain, fumbling for my white phone. After I text the jerk, not really caring if he steps foot on this plane, I switch phones and send kiss emojis to Cody, and a few eggplants, too, in honor of his more than satisfying Big D. God also blessed him with stamina. Damn, that cowboy can fuck.

I'm stretched, legs a little achy from a few positions he had me in, but totally, undeniably, satiated. I'll take a nap on the plane to rest up. But I also plan for the next time we meet, soon, when he's in Texas for games. We'll have to be careful, though. However, I know Austin like the back of my hand and I have a few places in mind where we can hide away, just the two of us.

I get an immediate text back on the white phone.

Jeremy: Shit. I partied too late with some old friends. I'll catch a flight later today.

Kallie: Partied? Great way to keep sober.

Jeremy: I drank soda, fyi. Stayed up too late. Crashed on someone's couch.

Right. Why don't I believe him? I turn off the phone, caring less about subsequent texts from him.

“He was out late and will catch a flight later,” I mumble to Dad.

After he gives the nod to the flight crew to take off, he asks the question I hoped to avoid. “Why separate rooms?”

“No matter what you think, things will never be the same between me and Jeremy—ever again. After all the cheating, there’s no way I can trust him. I can’t go back to him.” I shake my head with an exaggerated roll of my eyes.

“Your mother overlooked my indiscretions over the years. You could learn a thing or two from her.” His gruff voice agitates me. If we weren’t flying down the runway, I’d get off.

It’s my turn to cut him with a sharp glare. “Really? And you think the two of you are happy? That’s far from the life I want with a man I love.”

“The bloom of love fades over the years, sweetheart. You’ll see.” His gray unibrow furrows over his steely eyes.

“It already has. So excuse me if I don’t want to start a marriage like that.”

“I’d prefer you think of this as a business arrangement with Jeremy. That’s all it has to be.”

“What? Why, and why him? You used to go through that golden Rolodex of yours and fix me up with sons of billionaires, you know. They’d be infinitely better than Whittaker.” I chew my cheek, dying to tell him about Cody—a semi-pro player who also rides bulls in the amateur rodeos, and doesn’t exactly have a fortune in his bank account. He told me his mother lives in a “nice” trailer park outside of Lewistown and manages the local grocery store. His father was a math teacher who had died, but he didn’t say how. Not exactly the pedigree Dad expects for me.

Who Cody is as a person means more to me than the rest. So far, even though we've only spent two nights together and I still question my ability to fully trust a man again, I think he's an amazing person. But Dad won't like him.

"I don't need to explain my reasons to you. But you'll marry Jeremy and that's the end of it."

"And if I don't, you take all of my money away, right?" I'm sick of this.

"I hate being so hard on you, honey, but yes. You'll marry Jeremy, and that's final. I've called a wedding planner and we'll talk soon about a new date."

"Unbelievable." In a huff, I cross my arms and train my eyes out the window as we break through the clouds above L.A. and the sun hits the silver wings. I'm reeling from his ultimatum, my head swimming with how to handle this.

In a perfect world, Dad would get to know Cody and respect him as a decent human being. I'd have my trust fund and be set for life. Cody and I could buy thousands of acres in Montana, own dozens of horses, and live happily together, pleasing each other in every way we know how.

I want so badly to tell Dad Jeremy is a fraud. He's a cheat, a stoner, an abuser, and he doesn't even know the seven P's of Marketing. But if I say one word...

Who knows what I'd be capable of under the influence again? My ex's threat comes rolling back to me.

How many times during our engagement did he want to hit me, abuse me? We'd argued often enough. He'd grabbed my arms and shook me plenty of times. Was it difficult for him to hold himself back from unleashing terror on me?

Zoe, the poor girlfriend from his past, comes to mind. I saw photos of them together in his old social media accounts. They appeared happy enough to the outside world. Given what Cody said about Zoe, though, that was probably a disguise for what was really going on behind closed doors.

That could be me, showing up with bruises up and down my arms. Or worse. I could be the abused woman. No, wait. I was the abused woman. Maybe Jeremy didn't leave bruises on me all those times he shook me, but he shouldn't have dared touch me during an argument like that, in the first place.

God, I've been so stupid. I've always considered myself a strong woman. How in the world did I end up engaged to someone like him?

I glance back at Dad, who has his nose stuck in today's papers—still a man who prefers his news in print versus online. Still a proud man believing women are beneath him.

That's how I ended up this way. Two sides of abuse, from the man I grew up with, to the man I thought I'd marry.

No wonder Mom's alcoholism only got worse year after year. Hell, she probably feels the weight of it all, too, lonely and neglected. And I've been a horrible daughter.

A shiver runs down my spine, and suddenly my body aches all over. Exhaustion seeps through my veins, rendering me weak.

No, today is not the day to tell dear old dad all of Jeremy's little secrets. I'm not strong enough yet to face off with either of them. But soon enough I will be.



### CHAPTER 14

#### INTERMISSION

#### BIG D

I'm pumped. My cowgirl is supposed to be here tonight at the first of two games in San Antonio. But I haven't spotted Kallie yet. I get a text during the break at the first period.

Kallie: I made it. You look hot on the ice.

A goofy grin can't help but hit my lips.

Cody: Hot for you. Meet me at the next intermission. I need your lips.

Kallie: I think I'll make you earn it, cowboy.

Cody: Tell me how. I'll do it.

Kallie: Score.

Cody: Get your lips ready.

I imagine her with red lipstick and don't give a fuck if I end up with it all over me as I play on the ice. The pressure is on because I'm dying to kiss her again, but I can handle it.

The entire second period, I chase the puck, eager to score and claim my prize. When I get the round rubber disk, I hoard it and shoot, but it deflects off the goalie's glove. Beau and Saint grumble at me, because I could have passed to them, as they might have had better shots. Before the period ends, though, I rack up two assists to Beau's goals.

Coming up scoreless at the second intermission in the locker room, I check the texts.

Kallie: Nice assists. But no score no lips. Until later.

I hate her teasing. I'll find her now and take what I want.

Cody: Where are you sitting?

Kallie: Up in the nosebleeds.

Cody: Why didn't you take the seat I had reserved for you?

I pulled some strings to get her a seat near our bench, although being Campbell's daughter, she could probably have gotten any seat in the house she desired. With her front and center, I wanted to show off, to blow her kisses and winks as I flew by.

I would have easier access to kiss her between periods.

Kallie: I like the view from up here and I didn't want to distract you.

Little does she know it is distracting. She's here and I can't see her beautiful face.

I put up with it, and charge ahead into the final period. We're tied and going for it, not giving the San Antonio Stars any breathing room. In the last minutes of the game, we're on the power play and Duke pulls Storm out of the net, putting an extra player

on the ice. Beau has the puck and charges down as we get into position.

He sends it across to Saint, who doesn't see a shot, so he ricochets it to me. I definitely don't have a shot with two Stars players on me like glue. I sail it around the boards, and we all adjust and move closer. Their goalie fights to keep an eye on the puck as we keep it moving.

Our center, Miller, comes away with it from the boards. He and Beau play a passing game, back and forth, until they finally see an opening. Miller shoots, but it hits high on the bar of the net and curves toward me. It smacks my shoulder pad, then lands in front of me, perfectly mating with my stick. In a split second, I see a clear path to the net. One slap shot will do it nicely.

I shoot, sending it flying under the crossbar at top-notch speed, right as the buzzer sounds. We win.

"Yeah!" I fist pump the air. The guys pile around me, all of us yelling, happy to advance in the standings. So far this season we've stayed at the top of our division. Barring any changes to our lineup, which can happen anytime since we send up players to the Vipers when they need it, if we keep playing like this, then we'll end up in a solid run for the cup.

I scan the nosebleeds before I exit the ice, but don't see any sign of my auburn-haired beauty.

"Nice work tonight, team," Duke applauds us in the locker room once we all settle down from celebrating the win. My knee bounces, waiting for him to finish his speech, knowing Kallie is out there somewhere. My cock can hardly stay down; he's about to reunite with the best cowgirl pussy on the planet.

Finally, we're released, of course, with the usual warnings from him to keep out of

trouble until our second game here tomorrow.

The guys stay out of my way as I bully into the showers. They've been warned I want to be the first in, first done, and why. Of course, my request came with a lot of ribbing from them all, but they'd do the same if they had a chick they were dying to meet. These are the best friends and teammates I could have ever asked for. They all wish me well as I dress and leave.

I rush out to find Kallie. When I spot her at the players' entrance, she appears differently to me. Her hair is drawn up under a gray stocking cap, not a speck of auburn showing. Her black trench coat collar stands up, like she's hiding her face. And her top isn't visible, but jeans with a hole in the knee and a pair of tennis shoes peek out below the black hem of the coat. I almost think she doesn't want anyone to recognize her as the daughter of a very rich man.

But someone must, as she stands there, speaking with an older couple. Their backs are to me and all I see is white hair above green and yellow sweatshirts, the colors for the San Antonio team.

Kallie catches my eye, a warning in hers as I approach, giving her head a slight shake. I'm not sure what's going on, but I slow up and stop about five feet behind them, and listen in on the conversation.

"Mom's fine. You know, busy with her various charities," she grins. We've talked little of Mrs. Campbell. I make a mental note to do so soon.

"Well, give her our best. Tell her to come on down to San Antonio to visit soon. Oh, and we're looking forward to your wedding. We heard from our daughter, Patricia, in Austin that your father contracted with her to plan the event. I'm glad to hear you worked things out with that fellow of yours. Take care, dear," the woman replies and squeezes her arm. Then the pair walk away, leaving both of us stunned and staring at

each other.

Did I just hear that right? I don't make a move to close the distance, my jaw too heavy to scrape off the floor. She doesn't move to me either.

"Say something," she whispers after a minute.

"Wedding?" My eyebrows raise to my hairline and I snort.

Her mouth opens and closes, with the sorriest facial expression, like she came here to break my heart.

I don't know what to think, and just shake my head, sauntering past her. I jam my free hand into my pocket so I won't grab her and hold on to her tightly. My other hand holds the bag I'd packed for our romantic weekend over my shoulder. It holds fancy bath bubbles, candles, and more.

"Cody stop. Talk to me. Where are you going?" Her footsteps chase after me. For every one of mine, I hear four of hers.

"Well, seeing how I rented us a little Air BNB for the weekend that's supposed to have a beautiful bathtub, I'm going there. I paid for it. I might as well use it," I gripe, walking faster, and shift my hold on the bag. The two glasses and bottle of champagne clink together in it.

Jeez, I went all out for her. A chef should show up to the rental soon to cook an intimate dinner for two tonight. I have roses being delivered in the morning for her. A fresh box of condoms is in the bag, of course. I even bought her a gold necklace with a horseshoe charm on the end of it. Nothing too fancy, but all I could afford right now.

Yeah, I had our entire time planned together. Wine, dine, sixty-nine, plenty of talking, a helluva lot of sex. With every intention of claiming my cowgirl for three days straight when I'm not on the ice.

But she's not mine. Probably never was to begin with.

"I'm not marrying him," she cries, catching up to me, tugging at my sleeve. "Please stop."

I halt in the middle of the parking lot, most of it empty now after the game. Facing her, I can hardly bring myself to look into her eyes. "What, Kallie? What am I missing here? Am I just a plaything? He cheated on you, so you're getting back at him with me?"

"No. Absolutely not. I told you I'm done with him."

"You say that, and yet there's a wedding planner apparently circling some date in red on her calendar for you to marry the asswipe."

"That's all my father's doing. I haven't agreed to marry Jeremy."

"I told you about his past, Kallie. You told me how he's treated you. Do you want to end up like Zoe?"

"No, but I can't just pick up and go. I have a plan?—"

"What do you want, revenge?"

She crosses her arms under her breasts, heaving from our argument.

"Jesus. You do."

“For all the crap these two men have put me through... Yeah, sometimes I see red. I want to get back at them.” She points off to the side like they stand right there.

“Come on. You’re beautiful and smart. You could live anywhere else, get a job, and be free of them?—”

“I’m doing it for the money, okay?”

I blink. My head jerks back. “What the hell are you talking about?”

### CHAPTER 15

#### PLAYING TO LOSE

##### BIG D

Money has always been a burden to me. Grew up with very little of it, yet I was a happy kid. I make enough for a simple life as a bachelor in L.A. Still happy. Sure, if I had more I might be able to do more, have a nicer place to live, a nicer car. Having those things does not guarantee I'd be any happier with myself.

That ranch and horses I want in Montana someday, complete with a special cowgirl to keep me company—that could bring years of happiness, though. And if it makes Kallie happy to have those things... Then yep, I'll need to be making more money.

“I have a sizable trust fund, but Dad will take it away if I don't marry Jeremy,” Kallie finally admits as we continue to argue in the middle of the parking lot. When she talks of money, though, I'm certain we don't have the same views about it. She grew up with more than she could ever want. Could our different backgrounds cause us to go our separate ways in the end?

“Doesn't your dad know he cheated on you?”

“Yes, but he doesn't know about the addiction.”

“Then tell him. What father in his right mind wants their daughter to be married off to a guy hooked on drugs who can't keep his dick in his pants?”



She hesitates, like she doesn't want to tell me something, then changes her mind. "Jeremy threatened to hurt me if I say a word about the drugs to Dad."

My blood boils. I thread my fingers through my hair with one hand, pacing away a few feet. "That jackass better hope I never run into him again. He'll get an ass whooping for threatening you."

"Look, I'm just waiting for the right moment, when he shows his true colors and fucks up, so I can prove to Dad he'd be an embarrassment to the family and to his business. Dad will hate that, then fire him. Jeremy's threats will have no meaning; it'll be all his fault and he can't hurt me then. I'll be able to appease Dad and get access to the funds. Then I'll leave and I can start anew somewhere. With you? Montana maybe? I don't know."

With a scowl, I set my bag down, maybe a little too hard to the sound of the glassware complaining inside of it. "Kallie, if money means so much to you that you'd endure through all of this, will I even be enough for you? I'm just a poor cowboy hick from Montana, living in L.A. on semi-pro pay, which is not a cheap place to reside, given the cost of living there. If all you want is money, then maybe I'm not cut out to be in your world."

"No, it's not like that. Cody." Her fingers gather my shirt like a desperate plea. "You're amazing exactly the way you are, money or not. Money has never been an important factor for me when it comes to the men I date."

That's because you have it, I want to say, but don't. I stop the argument to catch a breath. I chew my cheek, pace a little, arms folded over my chest, taking stock of things. Of all the cowgirls I could have hooked up with, I had to do it with the most beautiful one in the middle of the most fucked up situation. I finally square back up to her.

“Then leave now, before you get any further into this. Forget the money. Come stay with me in California and we’ll figure things out. I have plenty of room for you in my apartment above Saint’s garage. Hell, Saint doesn’t use half the bedrooms in his house, so there’s probably a huge closet there you could claim because I imagine you have a pretty large wardrobe. Or we can move out and get our own place together.”

“I wish...” She doesn’t finish her thought as her phone rings in the pocket of her trench coat. When she retrieves it, I spy jerk-face’s name on it.

She taps a few buttons. “He’s texted me a few times in the past hour. And now a call? I better take this, in case it’s important.”

Nothing he has to say can be that important. But I let her get it. “Go ahead. I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

Her eyes do a double take, like me saying that is unbelievable to her. She walks a few feet away and answers the call.

“Hello?”

With both hands, I scrub my face and listen intently.

“Uh, yeah. I am in San Antonio. How did you know?” She asks.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. My instincts tell me there’s something more to all of this than she knows, something going on between Jeremy and her dad. I don’t know what it means, but when it comes to Whittaker, I won’t second guess the feeling in my gut.

“I’m visiting a friend,” she exclaims, her voice rising.

Back in the friend zone. Great. I scoff, hating that I'm standing here as witness to this nonsense. But I'm in it now, whether I think it's a good idea or not; I can't walk away from her.

"No, I won't be back for a few days... Well, you're the marketing director. I'm sure you'll figure it out... No, I won't help you. I took a few days off, so let me be. Goodbye, Jeremy." She hangs up; good thing because I was a second away from yanking it out of her grasp and putting him in his place.

She clicks a few buttons and I can see that she's powered off the phone. "Ugh. He knows I'm here. I have no idea how that's possible. Someone must have recognized me and called him. I even dressed down, covered my hair?—"

"So, you were trying to disguise yourself?" I wave my hand, motioning up and down her body.

With a sheepish look, she admits. "Yes. People in hockey know Dad and Jeremy, and by association, me, too. But I'm here for you, Cody. I took a chance because I wanted to see you in action. You're such an outstanding player. I reviewed your stats of the past few years, and I can't believe a national team hasn't snatched you up."

"Yeah? You can thank Jeremy for the false rumors about me."

"For what it's worth, I loved every minute of the game, watching you out there."

My chest deflates, finally able to relax, like it'd been so wound up from the moment I first saw her tonight. I step toward her, finally bringing her into my arms, enveloping her in my protective shield of a body, and lodging her perfectly beneath my chin. My lips graze the top of her head. "I loved you being there. The only things better would be if you were wearing my jersey and if I could have seen you sitting down by the glass as I played."

She chuckles and moves out of my hold, unbuttoning her coat. There she reveals her top, a blue hoodie. It's one that the Puckers sell that says, in bold white letters, "Property of the Puckers."

"Will this do?" She asks.

My lips spread wide, splitting my face. "I'm so fucking happy to see you wearing that. Of course, my jersey, number thirteen, would be better."

"You want me to wear your jersey? You know what that means?" Even in the dark of the parking lot, the gleam returns to her eyes.

"Yeah, I know." I surround her with my arms again, molding our bodies together. "It means you're mine. But I don't need a jersey to prove that."

Our mouths collide, fusing with hot passion, and pent-up need. Tongues twirl, greedily deepening. Moans communicate, saying all the things we want to say to each other but haven't yet.

My cock needs to bury inside of her, and he makes his presence known, knocking on her stomach. She reaches between us, rubbing him. He's primed and ready for action.

I groan and it's all I can do to let her go, as we stand here in the now empty lot under the stars. "So are we still on for tonight, my cowgirl? I planned some sweet surprises for you."

"Of course. I've been looking forward to time with you all week. I want to be with you. That's why I'm here. But Cody, I'm sorry about?—"

"Hey, sh. It's okay. We'll figure it out. As long as we're together, it's all that matters. Yeah?"

“Yes. I’m parked over there.” With keys in hand, she points to a sporty red Mercedes. A click of a button unlocks the doors and the taillights blink on and off.

Of course, this version of her would drive something fancy like that. While in my mind, she’s riding in an old truck with me down the Sunrise Highway in Montana someday, wearing shit kickers and wranglers, holding hands with me, and singing classic country tunes as we watch the beautiful scenery pass by.

### CHAPTER 16

#### PLAYING TO WIN

##### BIG D

Our weekend in San Antonio was every bit as romantic as I'd planned. Plenty of sex peppered with some serious conversations. By the time I left Texas, we'd made arrangements to see each other again soon. Nothing would make me happier, except maybe forgetting Whittaker exists in the first place. That would make my day.

I agreed to go along with her plan, because the money is important to her. Still not sure it's the best route of action or if the amount of money in her trust fund is worth all the aggravation, though.

The thirteen hundred miles between Kallie in Texas and me in L.A. instigates an entirely new level of insecurities I don't know I have in me. I trust her, but not him, and being such a long distance from her keeps my mind living in constant worry.

Is he trying to win her over with false charm from nine to five? Or what if he's plotting how to hurt her after work? I can't stand to think of finding bruises on her arms, like I did with Zoe. What if he takes away the one good thing in my life, my cowgirl?

I started upping the number of times I contact her each day, as if she's busy talking with me, then that makes less time for him to intrude on her life. My voice becomes more and more desperate to my ears as we talk; can't imagine how she perceives it.

To make matters worse, there's a PR emergency they are both having to work overtime to contain. One of the Austin team members has been accused of assault in a bar brawl, and it broke all over the news. They have all kinds of fires to put out and things to do.

Before my game tonight, we'd texted. She told me she was eating Chinese takeout with Jeremy in the office. Then I find out they are there alone together, strategizing their media interventions to get ahead of this fiasco.

That doesn't sit well with me and I start an argument with her out of frustration. Only I don't have time since Duke orders the team out onto the ice for warmups, so the worries follow me there. By the time the game starts, I'm so preoccupied with thoughts of him and her together, I cannot get into the zone. I miss the simple puck passes, fail to assist or score, and I lag as if my legs are heavy like cement. Duke eventually benches me for the entire third period.

"What the fuck is going on with you lately? Come see me in my office after the game," Duke yells, tossing a towels at my head as I take a seat on the bench. I don't move until the game is over. The Puckers lost, and I take it on as my personal responsibility for letting my teammates down.

My relationship with Kallie is beginning to take its toll on me.

I take the ass whooping Duke doles out as he stands behind his desk, hands on the top of it spread wide, yelling. He finally takes a breath. "Let me ask you this, D. Do you want to play professionally again?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"Then get your head out of your ass. You're playing not to lose, D. That's a surefire way to lose it all," he says, in a voice that distinctly reminds me of my father's.

Upon further introspection, he's right. I'm playing like shit. I had wanted this year to be great, had hoped this could be my breakthrough year. But I've been playing without that edge that a winner plays with.

More than that. I'm playing like I'll lose the woman that I'm falling for to another man. And that's a not a good way to go down.

Duke ends his tirade, then sits behind his desk, lacing his fingers on it. "Now, let me remove my coach's hat and put on my friend's hat, because we were friends and teammates before I was promoted to coach. Talk to me. Tell me what's going on."

So I do, giving him all the details and the entire story between Kallie and me, because he's the one guy I know I can trust. When I near the end, I state out loud my deepest desire.

"I wish I could get traded to play in Texas. That way I'd be closer to her, to protect her, to be there as needed."

Duke drops his head to his hands, then plows them through his hair. The coach's hat returns. "I'm already waiting to hear if I'm going to lose Storm to the Vipers. Now you want out of here, too? How is the team going to win the cup this year if I don't have you guys playing?"

"Sorry, coach. I want the team to do well, too." I hang my head, because I'd miss the guys. Beau, Tucker, Storm, Saint. We're like brothers in arms, seeing each other through so much over the past couple of years.

"Yeah, sure. But you want your pretty rodeo queen, too. I get it." He twiddles his thumbs in the center of the desk as if debating in his head. "I've met Mr. Campbell from Austin a few times over the years. Cannot say that I've been impressed with him at all. There's someone else we know who can't stand him—Brad. I don't know the



full story there, but I do know he avoids Texas like the plague.”

Super agent Brad is our go-to guy, whom many of us turn to when we have troubles. And with Duke’s encouragement, we call him right then and there. I share the entire ordeal, and hope he can instigate a trade for me.

“Fucking Texas. It has to be Texas?” He asks.

“Yep. Anywhere. Semi-pro or pro. Whatever team you can get me on. I need to be within reach of Kallie Campbell.”

“Fucking Campbell. Can’t stand her dad. And Whittaker? He’s the worst. I repped him for a year early in his career. He outed me and my partner at the time, and it wasn’t cool. What I do in my personal life is mine. Over the years, he’s made no effort to hide his disdain for me, telling other players about me. If there’s anything I can do to help you and Kallie, you let me know.”

“Just get me into Texas, someway, somehow,” I beg, Brad’s story sounding all too familiar like my own. Whittaker is nothing but an overgrown bully. He needs this cowboy to put him in his place because I can’t stand bullies.

“You got it. I’ll see what strings I can pull, favors I can call in. I’ll get back to you as soon as I have news,” Brad confirms and clicks off the line.

As I leave Duke’s office, he slaps me on the back. “If everything works out, I’m glad you’ll be happy, buddy. Guess this means I should take another look at the rookie videos the scout sent me, though, since I’ll need to replace you and Storm soon. God, I hate rookies.”

I laugh with him, somewhat a welcome relief, as we lean against the doorway of his office and trade funny stories about some rookies we knew in the past. Then I turn

serious. “If I’d have had you as a mentor in my first year in the league, Duke, my career would have taken a whole different turn. Whoever ends up coming to the team, they’re lucky to have you as a coach.”

He nods, his chin a little wobbly. “Thanks. That means a lot. Of course, this doesn’t let you off the hook. I expect you at hockey conditioning camp this summer on my ranch, helping to kick these rookie asses into shape.”

“Don’t worry, nothing I love better than giving rookies a welcome to the league party.” I wink and leave. On the way home, I call Kallie. I don’t tell her yet about the possibility of a transfer, but I’m feeling hopeful again.

From this point forward, I’ll play to win, in hockey and with my heart, and somehow figure out a way for Kallie and me to get out of this mess and be together.

### CHAPTER 17

#### AGHAST

#### KALLIE

The view always tugs at my heartstrings when I pull into the driveway of the Campbell Ranch early in the morning. Today is no exception. The long paved driveway winds through acres of fields on both sides, green with grass, edged by shade trees, and lined with white fences.

Horses gallop alongside as I drive, like they're racing me. I spot my girl, a spirited Appaloosa named Wild Rose, who I've been riding for years. She knows I'm here.

"Rosie!" I call out my open window and wave. As if she hears me, she bucks her back end up and whinnies. I haven't ridden since I've been back from Montana, and the itch to do so has grown stronger every single day. I can't wait to get her out on the trails today.

The driveway ends, opening up to a large area outside our mansion, a stately, sprawling home made of stone and dark wood. To the left behind it, are two big white barns, and the rest of the ranch operations beyond those. I ignore the house for now and park by the white structures.

I miss the ranch. A part of me didn't come back here until now, still aching over Dad hiring a man to manage it. In the office, anytime Dad starts to talk about anything associated with the ranch, I change subjects or walk away.

Today, I'm here to face it all. If I'm going to move on and leave Texas, then I need to put certain things behind me. But first, I ride.

An hour later, I'm on the back of Rosie and trot away, leaving the barns behind me. The sun shines brightly, and the wind whips my hair wildly. It's as close a feeling to being free as I can imagine right now.

"Yah, let's go," I yell, and spur Rosie to pick up the pace. We dash across a field, cutting over to one of my favorite trails that takes us up into the hills.

While half of the ranch is flat land, the rest features rolling hills, a vineyard, a beautiful river, and spring-fed pools. The fishing is fantastic here, which makes me think of my cowboy and his penchant for bow hunting and the outdoors.

Jeremy never was much for spending time on the ranch anymore than he had to. The two men couldn't be more opposite. And what the hell did I see in my ex in the first place? A handsome face? A pricey lifestyle? Fame in hockey, that ended up being all too fleeting?

Now, I see nothing in him but years of my life wasted.

The trail narrows, and Rosie slows. I lean over her mane and lay my head on her, petting the side of her neck. Like I've done many times, I talk with her, telling her all my fears. Confiding all my worries.

She's the best listener. She paws the ground when I mention Jeremy's name like she wants to ram into him full throttle. At the mention of Cody's name, she gives a cute neigh.

I think she's trying to tell me something.

“Soon, girl, soon. I’ll bring Cody to meet you. Better yet, maybe I can move you to Montana depending upon how things go.” We come to a clearing at the top of the trail, to a little grassy knoll. The rain gods have been kind to Texas this fall, so things aren’t as dry as usual, and wildflowers abound.

I let Rosie wander and graze, while I spread a blanket. At first, I doze off, dreaming of a life I haven’t allowed myself to dream in a long time. When I awake, wide eyed, fitful, I pull out my journal, pen, and an apple from my saddlebag.

I sift through the pages of notes and floral and fauna sketches, years’ worth of thoughts and hopes. When a page flips to one entry I made—the day after I met Jeremy, I don’t even bother to read it. I tear it out, along with any successive page that had his name on it.

Re-reading those isn’t an option. I’m done and over him. I roll them into a ball and will burn it the first chance I have.

Open to a fresh page, my pen flourishes with new ideas, gaining steam like I can’t write fast enough to keep up with my mind, filling pages and pages. Before I know it, I’ve reached the end of the entire journal, the last blank space.

I flip back through what I just wrote, realizing it was really a plan for my life. A new ranch with plenty of horses to care for, a thriving piece of land that makes a good living for a family of four, maybe six. A family for me to love, including a cowboy with a big D, kids, and a dog named Brewster. Tears threaten my eyes because I finally know what I want, what I desire. I have to have this life.

At the end, on the last line, I write Mrs. Cody Ford with plenty of curly flourishes. I draw a heart around it all and seal it with a lip gloss kiss. For a while longer, I lay there under the sun, holding the journal to my chest, sending my wishes out into the universe.

\* \* \*

I make it back to the barn by lunchtime. Steven, the ranch manager, approaches me warily.

“Hiya. Can I put Rosie away for you, miss?” There’s been no love lost between us since he was hired. Now though, what’s done is done. Suddenly no longer harboring hard feelings, I smile sweetly and thank him.

“Take care, Rosie. I’ll see you again soon, I promise.” I give her neck a squeeze, then a kiss on the nose. She whinnies after me as I turn toward the house.

The first thing I notice is the four garage doors are open. Mom’s car, her old white Mercedes SL500, is missing from its usual spot, now replaced by a black Escalade. Interesting. Mom loved her old car and had kept it in perfect condition for years. Mercedes are like that; a huge price tag, but such amazing quality, they last a long time.

I can’t even imagine my petite mother in her designer clothes, hiking herself up into the driver’s seat of the huge SUV. I can totally picture me using it though, towing Rosie in a trailer behind me when I finally leave this place for good.

Unfortunately, I also spot Jeremy’s Ferrari sports car, and Dad’s late model Cadillac. When I enter the breezeway between the barn and the house, I hear raised voices as I come into the kitchen. The two men are practically at each other’s throats, but nothing they say makes any sense.

“What’s going on?” When I appear through the entryway, they halt their conversation. Like a switch has been turned off, both men act like nothing is wrong.

“Oh, sweetheart. Would you like a mimosa? Chef is preparing a beautiful lunch for us

all to celebrate your mother's birthday." Dad waves a hand toward the tray of champagne and orange juice, but Mom isn't in sight, even though she's the reason we are all gathered here today.

"Maybe when I get done with a shower. I don't think any of you want me to smell like a horse while we eat. I'll be back." Before I can get too far down the hall, Jeremy follows and swings me around by the elbow. "What do you want?"

"Think we can put on a good show in front of your parents? Or are you too infatuated with Cody Ford to see things clearly?"

A tremble works through me from his evil voice. "How do you know about him?"

"Wherever you go, I'm there with you. Do you really think I don't keep tabs on my future wife? "

I gasp. He's been watching me? Having me followed? How? How dare he.

"You have no right to use that word. I'll never be anything to you."

"Break things off with him. Now." He seethes.

"Or else what? Are you threatening to hurt me again? Or are these empty promises?" My brazen attack is met with steam practically coming off of his reddening face, his grip on my elbow tighter than ever. Fine, let it bruise. I'll have proof to bring to Dad. It's then I see his eyes, slightly dilated. "Oh, my God. You're using again."

"Shut up. You say one word?—"

"Kallie, you're home." Mom's voice floats down the hall like a song I've been longing to hear. She couldn't have made a more perfectly timed appearance. Her

arms spread as she floats toward me, and folds me into her loving hold, tearing me away from Jeremy's grasp.

I miss this from her. I shouldn't have stayed away from her as long as I did. She needs me; I can feel it in her hug. We haven't always had the best relationship. When I broke things off with Jeremy, she was mad and called me an irresponsible, spoiled girl. Today feels different.

"Hi, Mom. I'm so glad to see you." We part, but I hold on to her arm, staying by her side, and we face my idiot ex together.

"Mom. How are you today? Looking fresh, as always." Jeremy takes on that fake tone of voice like he cares, as he bends to kiss her cheek. I feel her body go stiff next to me, like she abhors his invasion. I do as well. "Happy Birthday. I can't wait for you to see the present Kallie and I got you." Neither can I, since we didn't do a joint present.

I'd already bought Mom my traditional present. Always something from Hermes every year, her favorite designer. This year I chose a beautiful printed silk scarf featuring an illustration of people spending a day by a lake, with a train and a hot-air balloon passing by, all done in pretty shades of blue and gray. It'll go well with the color of her eyes.

"Leave us, Jeremy. I have some things I want to show my daughter."

"I really think you should come with me to the kitchen." He towers closer, imposing. "Chef has almost finished preparing lunch. Kallie has to shower."

"No." She cowers closer into my body. Something isn't right here.

"Come on now, Isabelle. You don't want to keep your husband waiting." Jeremy



reaches to take her arm, but I can't let him. I pull Mom away and hurry down the hall with her.

"I'm sure we won't be long." I toss behind me. Once we're in her bedroom, I close and lock the door. I listen with my ear against it for his footsteps, which eventually head back in the direction of the kitchen.

"Mom? Is everything okay?" I turn and take her by the hands to sit with me on her bed. She shakes like a leaf, tears threatening to ruin her makeup, and scaring me. "What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing. Just another year older. Aging is hell." She sniffles, dabbing at her eyes. I can't help but notice more wrinkles and gray hairs on her. Maybe age is taking its toll, but she usually took better care of herself than this. I reach over to get a tissue for her and notice the water decanter. Only water doesn't usually smell like vodka.

"Here you go." I make sure the tissue is securely in her hand. "Where's your Mercedes? I didn't see it in the garage."

"Oh, um, after the accident this summer?—"

"What accident?" God, I didn't even know. I've been so selfish, mired in my own crap, hidden away in Montana. Guilt riddles through me for not trying harder to be a good daughter for her.

"J-just a little fender bender, that's all." She's quick to assure me. I'd hate to be a fly on the wall when Dad found out. I'm sure he busted a gasket in his head over that. Was she drunk? Did she lose her license? "Your dad worried about me being in that old, small car, and decided I needed something bigger. And a driver to take me around wherever I need to go. Oh, don't look at me like that. I actually don't mind. When I do lunch with my ladies, I make them all jealous now that I have a rather

handsome chauffeur at my disposal.” She attempts a rather weak smile.

“Tell me about you. Are you and, um, Jeremy, getting along?” She swallows and clears her throat, patting it as if she has a frog in it. Crossing to the decanter, she pours herself a full glass of the clear liquid. I wait to answer until she’s downed it in two huge gulps.

“Uh, not exactly. I don’t love him anymore.”

She sets the glass down and puts a hand on my cheek. “Surely you can find some way to forgive him?”

“No, I cannot. I don’t know how you stayed with Dad all these years. I know that couldn’t have been easy on you. Are you even happy here, Mom?”

“Oh. Of c-course. Besides, where else would I go?” She hugs her sides, eyes on the floor, to me, the picture of complete and utter brokenness.

“With me. Away.” I stand and take her hands, squeezing them for gentle assurance. “You and I deserve better than what Dad and Jeremy give us. Enough of this. Let’s leave them behind and search for our own happiness.”

Her sad, tired blue eyes raise to mine, and suddenly all the money in the world couldn’t keep me here. We’ll leave tonight. With a brave smile, she shakes her head.

“I can’t. But you do what you must.” She throws her arms around me for a hug tighter than I’ve ever had from her, that I can recall. With a whisper, she says, “Save yourself while you can.”

With that, she rushes out of the room, leaving me there aghast, a shiver running down my spine.

### CHAPTER 18

#### STAMPEDE FORWARD

##### BIG D

I'm ready to stampede someone's face. Appropriate, since we're in Canada, playing against the Alberta Stampede.

Storm's new girlfriend, Misty, the chick who met him when he was streaking naked ass through the hallway of his apartment building, shows up at the game, holding a sign that reads, "#1 has a bigger stick than Sanderson."

Number one being Storm's number, as our goalie. Sanderson being Gregor Sanderson, her ex—and the brother to Scott Sanderson, the rookie I beat up during our game with the Vancouver Ice.

Gregor's out for blood, for mine and Storm's.

Misty's best friend sitting beside her holds another sign. "Sanderson is a douche-canoe." That he is.

Storm is waiting on pins and needles for Brad to call with news that he's got a new contract for him to play in Denver.

I'm clenching my fists, just waiting for the right moment to pounce on Gregor. He's even more of a jerk than his little brother was.

This game gets more interesting as the seconds tick by.

Unfortunately, Kallie isn't here to witness all of this drama.

I glance at the front-row seat against the glass, where she should be sitting. She even promised to wear my jersey. She was to fly in today from Austin, taking a couple of days off to be with me here in Canada, but her seat has been empty the entire first period.

Where is she? My pulse races, hoping she's okay, and itching to get off the ice during intermission to check my phone.

Meanwhile, there's a lot of chirping going on between Sanderson and Storm. Saint and I laugh, hearing some great zingers Storm yells at him. The guy is a real jerk and needs his ass kicked. I offer, but Storm tells me he's got this. And for once, I think he's finally ready to handle a fight himself, whereas usually I take care of it for him.

Suddenly, Duke calls a time-out. And sure enough, he gets word from Brad that Storm is being sent to Denver to play for the professional team, the Aspens, immediately. Damn, I couldn't be more proud—and jealous. I can't wait for Brad's call much longer. I need to be with Kallie.

Before we can resume playing, there's Sanderson making jacking off motions against the glass to Storm's girl. I growl and start off toward him. Saint's mad, too, but Storm beats us to it. He throws down his gloves, and the fight is on.

Gotta hand it to him. He does great, and wins, in my opinion, since he manages to get in some hard punches to the face and yank off his jersey. Yep, Storm is ready for the big time. I'll miss him, but I'm sure we'll stay in touch.

When we finally get to the intermission, I grab my phone in the locker room first

thing. The news from Kallie isn't good.

Kallie: Jeremy intercepted me at the airport in Austin before I could take off.

Cody: WTF? What did he want?

Kallie: Another team PR emergency.

The team seems to suddenly be having a rash of those. I wouldn't put it past Jeremy to be fabricating some, just to control her.

Kallie: Mom also called and asked me to stop by to see her. She's not feeling well. I'm sorry.

Cody: So you're not coming?

That's the third time over the past week that her mother's been ill. My heart takes a nosedive into my stomach. But I refuse to be that guy again, worried I'm losing her. This is only her job, stressful as it is. I'm beginning to see long distance sucks.

Kallie: I'm sorry.

Cody: Don't apologize again. It's fine. I know you have work to do, and I hope your mom is okay. I trust you.

Kallie: Was there a time you didn't trust me?

Shit. I have to get back on the ice soon and don't have time to let my girlfriend know I worry about her and Jeremy together all the time. Besides, that's playing to lose when I'm playing to win.

Cody: I've trusted you since day one. We're all in, aren't we, cowgirl?

She sends me about a dozen smile and heart emojis, and they put me back on top of the world.

Later, after the game, Storm and Misty are on their way to Denver, while Saint and I get stuck best-friend-sitting. Anastasia has a flight out in the morning. We're under strict orders from Misty to keep an eye on her.

I'd say Saint is keeping both eyes on her ass. Her tits, too. She's a pretty and curvaceous woman, not the typical type I see Saint with, but I can tell he's intrigued by her.

They keep up a flirty banter, while I keep up with texts from Kallie.

Kallie: How about next week? I have a conference to attend in Denver.

I check the dates with my game schedule.

Cody: I could fly in for a night.

My cock twitches under the table as if to say that's plenty of time for what he wants to do with her.

I check flights when suddenly I get a call from Brad. He must be working overtime tonight, first Storm's news and now me? I hop off the barstool and walk outside to take the call.

"Yeah, Brad? Any news?"

"You ready for this? It's quite the deal. I used every favor people owed me. I got you

moving from the L.A. Vipers, to a few other teams, and finally, I got you on the Austin Capitals.” He pauses, waiting for my response.

“Yes.” I erupt, and pump my fist in the air. “You are worth every penny I pay you, dude.”

“So I’ve been told by every guy who gets the contract they want. But what will happen once Campbell or Whittaker find out you’re there?”

I shake my head, unsure, but I have to make this work for Kallie’s sake. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.”

“Okay. Listen though, and I shouldn’t really be telling you this, so it’s between us. The league will be announcing more expansion teams soon for next season. I’m starting a list of players who want to move. Do you want in, or is Austin your final destination?”

This could be huge. The opportunity to start fresh in a new town with a new team? But is Kallie really ready to leave Austin? She tells me she and her mother are getting close again. But I doubt I want us to stay if her father and ex continue to be menaces.

“Yeah, put me down. Doesn’t hurt to see if something better comes along.”

Later that night, I have the hotel office print out my new contracts so I can give them a proper read through and sign them. Mainly, I eye the new high six-figures league minimum salary I’ll be making. My jaw drops. I could kiss Brad right now for being the top-notch negotiator he is.

I know Kallie says money isn’t everything to her, but for the dreams I have for our future, if this is real and forever between us, this money sure makes this poor cowboy feel a helluva lot more confident to boldly go forward, making Kallie all mine.

### CHAPTER 19

#### CODY-FIED

#### KALLIE

My pussy clenches around the biggest, most satisfying hard-rock cock I've ever had. Every inch of Cody fills me up inside, skin on skin, penetrating me like we were made to complete each other. Tonight, his first night in Austin, we decide we would do without condoms. I'm on the pill, anyway.

It's more than that, though. My heart is full, and my body burns for him when we're not together. Everything I feel with Cody is so different from the past with Jeremy. Like a magnification level of ten times, my emotions engage so much more with this cowboy. If that's not enough to last forever, then I don't know how to make a relationship work at all.

"You make the perfect welcome wagon. My cowgirl. It's so good. To be. Here with you. At last." Cody grunts between words, spearing me from behind with his cock, holding onto my hips with the tightest grip. When his new black leather couch arrived earlier today, I knew exactly how I wanted him. Behind me, as I bend over it.

"Yes, cowboy, so good. Every inch. I missed you."

"Me too, baby. But I'm here now. Fucking you so good. And I'll be here every night; so will you. You're not leaving. Stay. Move in with me." He caresses his hands from the small of my back up to my shoulders, massaging my skin along the way. Tingles



erupt all across my skin, making it hard to argue with him.

“Somehow, I don’t think I could leave if I tried. I’m Cody-fied.” I tease him with a smile, peering back at him. Everything we do is so filled with passion. I reach up and adjust his hands, one at a time, until they’re circling each side of my neck. I arch my back and the position deepens him further into me.

“Finally, you’re falling into my trap.” He chuckles. “You’re spoiling my cock, baby. I can’t go back to sheathing myself ever again after this. And now this amazing position? Yeah. I could go all night like this.” And he does, no complaints from me. God bless this man’s stamina.

All I feel is him. In the dark window across from us, all I see is us, doing it so beautifully together. We should be models for fucking. A series of whimpers leaves my chest, and I reach down and finger my clit, relieving the pressure there.

Between his movements and mine, my heart wildly palpitates, and my thighs shake. I can’t hold on to my sanity much longer. I’m slipping, tipping over, seeing white lights and breaking so hard, I almost pass out.

On the tip of my tongue are three little words, daring me to scream them out loud.

He jerks suddenly, as he explodes with a roar, filling me up with his seed. “Fuck, Kallie Ann. I love you,” he says them first, taking my breath away.

We hold there, and I can’t speak or move, almost in tears, overwhelmed by all the feelings rushing through me at once. Until his cock recedes from my body, leaving me longing for him yet again. He picks me up and gently carries me.

“I love you, too. So much,” I sob, happy tears run down my face.

“Yes, you do, baby. You do. Thank you for saying it, for not making me wait.” He kisses my forehead along the way to his shower.

I can hardly stand, still shaking. He has me in his arms and I trust him to hold me up. I trust this man with my life.

“The only drawback here? No bathtub.” He chuckles, adjusting the knobs for the perfect water temperature. “It’s a big enough shower, though. And I like this bench seat.”

“Well, I guess not everything can be perfect between us.” I muster a soft smile.

“But it’s pretty damn close,” he says, nuzzling into my neck. His fingers lace with mine, lifting them over my head. He holds them against the wall and captures my mouth, our tongues teasing and tantalizing.

His cock roars back to life, bouncing off my stomach.

“Cody, my God. You’re unreal.” I break away from his kiss on a groan.

“Thanks, I think. Is that code for you want more?” His cocky smile is deliciously undeniable.

“Yes. More.” I surprise myself.

He lifts me, and my ankles cross behind him. Entering my slick channel to the hilt in one shot, I cry out. It’s so good. Before Cody, I never knew how good a thick, penetrating cock could be. I hate thinking about Jeremy, but now I realize how small he must have been. How unsatisfied I was. Now that I’ve had the best, I’m never going back.

I lock eyes with Cody to say those special words again, because I mean them. He's changed me and my life will never be the same. From the first text when I was crying on the bathroom floor, that lifeline he threw me saved me. Fast forward to tonight, when he claimed his love for me—I finally know and believe that true love exists. And I'm right here in his arms.

“I love you, Cody. Tell me we're meant to last. Can you promise me forever?”

“I love you, too, so why don't you be my wife, cowgirl? I'll show you exactly what forever means.”

His words steal my breath away, as does his cock, pulsing deep within me. “Wife?”

“Yeah. You heard me. I want you to be my wife. And don't worry. I have a ring I bought for you yesterday before I left L.A. A big rock, baby. The sales person called it ostentatious. It's huge because I want every mother fucker within a mile of you to know you're claimed by me.”

“Oh God. This is crazy. You're crazy. I want to say yes.”

“So say yes. Make me your husband. Be my cowgirl and ride me for life. I see us, Kallie. We're up in Montana, with a ranch of our own, kids, pets, horses. It's all there waiting for us. Can you see it too?”

He's playing right into my dreams, everything I desire, and wrote into my journal. Worries eat away at the edges of my dream though, but I chase those away. “Mrs. Cody Ford. Mrs. Kallie Ford. I like it.”

“I like it, too. So it's a yes.”

“Yes. Yes!” I cry.

Suddenly, he turns off the water and runs with me out of the bathroom to his bed, his cock never dislodging. Horizontal, his body covers mine, and his hips piston into me.

“We just freshly made your bed, and now we’re getting it all wet,” I complain, but laugh at the same time.

“I don’t care, baby, I’m too excited. I’ll make love to you all night long in a damp bed. Tomorrow I’ll buy a new mattress, because guess what? I have a little money now.”

He winks and doesn’t slow down, pumping faster, filling me with so much passion, laughter, and love. I don’t want him to stop. Ever.

\* \* \*

I jolt awake in the middle of the night. Cody’s arm weighs on me. He breathes heavy, too. My phone lights up silently with a message. I see it’s two in the morning, as I reach for it.

When I see Jeremy’s name on a text, I almost jump. Reading it though, I yelp.

“Wha—what’s wrong?” Cody awakes. He rubs his eyes, adjusting to the light as I hold the phone for him to read as well. “What the hell?”

Jeremy: Why are you at this address? Who are you with?

“He’s definitely having me followed. I cannot believe him.” I fire off a message back, more than a little irate.

Kallie: I don’t question where you’ve been. Stay out of my life.

Jeremy: Who is there with you?

Kallie: Who were you with in L.A.? Or how about last Friday and Monday when you were supposedly home sick from work? I saw the red marks on your neck.

I didn't stop there.

Kallie: You have no claim on me anymore. So stop this nonsense of following me. Got it? We are DONE.

Too riled up now, I leap out of bed. I stomp to the kitchen, slam my phone on the counter, and search through Cody's boxes open there. So intensely fuming, I don't hear Cody come up behind me until his arms are wrapped around me.

"Whatcha doing?" He asks.

"I clean when I'm upset or mad."

"Good to know."

"Do you have any supplies? Multi-purpose cleaner? Hell, I'd take a Windex and paper towels."

"Uh, nope. In L.A., Saint had a housekeeper. I never had to clean. I'll hire one here, too."

"Ugh." I walk away, shaking out my hands from their need to be scrubbing something.

"I take it douche bag does this a lot. Follows you around?" He leans against the counter, and I realize he's put his boxers on. Doesn't stop me from eyeing his hefty

package. Whereas I'm in one of his t-shirts, swimming in it.

"Him or someone he's hired. It's creepy." I stop pacing and lean my head into his chest.

"Back in college, I had a friend who crept on his girl. Even went so far as to put a secret tracker on her phone. He knew where she was at all times. It especially came in handy because the guy was a real player, cheated on her a lot. Because of the app, he could cheat when he knew his girl was busy and never get caught."

I gasp and lunge for my phone, inspecting it. Opening apps, windows, trying to figure out if he infested my phone with something. Then a realization dawns on me and I turn slowly to face Cody.

"Jeremy gave me this phone as a gift, preloaded with apps and everything."

He snaps his finger and points at me. "Yep. That's what the other guy did, too. Is that why you have two phones? I wondered. I figured one was for work, one for personal."

Now I'm boiling over. "The pink is mine, the one I text you with. How dare he track me? Do you have a hammer? Something heavy I can destroy this phone with?"

"Hold on. Let's not be too hasty." He takes it from my hands and turns it off altogether. "Let's test the theory. Tomorrow, you go in to work. I don't have practice until the afternoon. I'll take it with me to a few places in the morning and see if he shows up anywhere."

"No. I don't want you anywhere near him. He could be dangerous, unpredictable," I fret.

“Right back at you, baby. But you know what? There’s two of us, and only one of him. Two brains versus one. Plus, my brawny build. Somehow we have to best him, don’t you think?” He strikes a pose, flexing his biceps, and kisses the boulder.

I kiss it, too, then fall into snorts and laughs, nestling myself against his chest as I squeeze him. “I love you, Cody, and I’m so happy you’re here now. It’s no longer just me, but the two of us against the world.”

“That’s right, but I won’t lie, Kallie. Now that I’m on the same soil as he is, it’s taking every ounce of my willpower not to find him and beat his ass. Instead, we’ll be smart about it and fight him together. Somehow, that creep will pay for what he did to you.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, can we forget him for the rest of the night? Can this make you forget?” He takes my hand and places it inside of his boxers, directly onto his hard shaft.

“Forget who? What?” My eyelids flutter and my cheeks flame. My body reacts to him. Monday morning I’ll walk into the office a zombie, after everything we’ve done in bed together. A well-fucked one, at that.

### CHAPTER 20

#### UNRAVELING

#### BIG D

The first couple of days in this city, I'd taken Kallie's white phone and played games with Jeremy. She had media meetings out of the office, so it was the right time to test the theory that he was tracking her every move.

I stopped at a few different places with the phone in my pocket, waiting to see what would happen. At the first two locations, the local post office and the grocery store, Jeremy texted, asking her if she was at the meeting, obviously realizing she must not be. I ignored those texts.

At the third location, a coffee shop near the arena, he drove by, and I recognized him in his sports car instantly. He didn't see me. This confirmed my suspicions, though. I called Kallie on her work line and told her the news that day.

The white phone has been turned off ever since. She keeps her pink phone on her body at all times so he doesn't get the same bright idea with that one.

Now that we know he's a creeper, and the lengths he'll go to, we have every right to second guess him.

Now it's only a matter of time before he reacts to the news I'm here and playing for the Capitals. It takes a few more days.



“Who the hell made this deal?” Jeremy storms into the team room, pointing at me where I sit with the other defensemen, along with the coaches. We’re studying videos of the Los Angeles Vipers for our upcoming game against them, which will be my first official game with Austin.

My time with the Puckers and my knowledge from working adjacent to the Vipers proves useful in our studies today. I get a better feel for my new teammates as each day goes by.

The head coach, Stanley, stands and crosses his arms. If the two of them were in a fighting ring, my bet would be on Coach. He’s been at this a long time, and I respect the hell out of the guy. I also have since learned that he and Brad are friends, one of very few my agent has here.

Coach’s mug is intense as he glares at Jeremy like he hates the guy. I don’t blame him one bit.

“Last I checked, you’re in marketing, Whittaker. Last I checked, I’m the coach.” He barks and pounds his thumb into his chest.

“Yeah? Well, maybe not for long once I talk to Campbell.” Jeremy’s hands lodge on his hips as he stands glaring at me across the table. “And you’re gone. Don’t even suit up for the game.”

I know Brad, and I read the contract. There’s little this piss ant can do about me being here.

“Hey! Get the fuck out of my war room. You have no say in how I run this team.” Coach pushes toward him, his robust chest jutting out, bullying him with a scowl until he leaves the room.

The other defensemen whisper among themselves. From what I can gather, they aren't a part of the Whittaker fan club. We should get along well, in that case.

With his red face, I hope Coach doesn't have a heart attack as he sits back down. He says, "You have any trouble with Whittaker, you let me know."

"Will do, Coach. Thanks." I contain my laughter, absolutely pleased my presence here has that effect on Kallie's ex.

Over a glass of white wine after work with my cowgirl, I share about his outburst today in front of coach. I slip off her high heels and massage her feet while we talk; her moans are waking up my cock. Doesn't take much these days for him to be wide-eyed and ready for her.

I take this opportunity to hike her skirt up and caress her legs. I'm about to make a move on her, ready to skip dinner and go right for my dessert, between her legs, when she gets a call.

"Oh, it's Mom. I should answer, see if she's feeling better today. Dad's out of town, so she's there at the house all alone. If she just wouldn't drink so much..."

We've talked at length about her mother. Kallie wants to do an intervention and try to get her to agree to go to a treatment center. I'll back her on whatever she wants to do to help her mother get the care she needs. It seems to worry her and keep her up at night sometimes. Since being here, I've learned Kallie sleeps best after I've given her plenty of Big D. Otherwise, she's a very light sleeper.

"Hi, Mom," she answers and puts it on speakerphone so she can thread her fingers through my hair. I inhale her sweet nectar, leaning in and sucking her clit through the sheer black fabric of her panties.

“Kallie Ann?” Isabella’s shaky, weak voice stops my action. “A man was here today, accusing me of terrible things.”

“What are you talking about, Mom?” She rises from the couch, and I right her skirt back down in the same move.

“There was an accident this summer. Oh, shoot. I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.” Her slurring words are a clue she’s drunk. She ends with a hiccup before she hangs up.

“I need to go to her.” Kallie runs to the bedroom. I follow and watch her as she changes into jeans and a sweatshirt.

“I’ll go with you, and drive,” I say, but she stops me as she snatches up her purse from where she left it by the door.

“No, please. Let me handle this on my own. She’ll be embarrassed to have met you in this state she’s in.”

“Kallie—”

“Seriously, stay here. It’s probably just the alcohol talking. I’ll help her get to bed, and I don’t know. Maybe stay with her until morning. If she’s sober then, I can ask her about this accident, but hopefully it’s just something she dreamed up while drinking too much tonight.”

Against my better judgement, I drop it. “Okay. Call me and keep me posted. I love you.”

“Love you, too.” We kiss and she leaves.

With an evening alone ahead of me now, it's odd. I peer around the apartment, now empty without her in it. I don't like it, so cold and quiet. It's as if her presence is what makes this place a home. Our home.

There's a laundry basket of towels that need folding, left on the kitchen counter this morning, so I make myself useful.

I've been with Kallie every night since I moved here, and I love it. Knowing I have someone to come home to, that I can be there for her to sip wine at the end of a long day and talk about things, there's something so powerful in our connection now. We keep getting better every day together.

The only thing I'd love more is if she'd wear her engagement ring and introduce me to her parents. But as she reminds me, baby steps. I promised patience, so I'm letting her lead the direction and pace of things. Jeremy knows I'm here. That's step one.

The next step will be her father, because undoubtedly Mr. Campbell's heard from Jeremy by now.

Then we'll?—

A phone buzzing jerks me out of my thoughts. Not mine. I follow the sound and realize it's from her pink phone. She left it on the couch in her haste to leave. I hate knowing she's out there without a phone, without a way to reach me if her car breaks down or something happens.

I pick it up, curious to see who is contacting her. It only slightly feels like an invasion of privacy, but I would hope at this point neither of us is hiding anything from each other. She's welcome to my phone anytime, although I'd probably prefer she stays off any of the puck bunny social media sites that might mention my name. Otherwise, my life is an open book.

The text notification on her lock screen shows a partial text from someone named Marissa.

Marissa... Yes, I recall now. That was her maid of honor, the one who screwed around with Jeremy.

Marissa: I'm in the hospital room 313. Jeremy's unraveling. I need to talk. Please come see?—

“Fuck. What? Um...” Unraveling doesn't sound good. I don't have a way to reach Kallie and this seems important, maybe more than tending to her mother.

I've only been the ranch one time, and didn't really pay attention to where we were going since she was driving. I weigh all the options, trying to decide if I should leave and run after her.

Another text makes my decision clear.

Marissa: I know you hate me. I deserve it. He hurt me bad. I have a few stitches and I real?—

Wait. Stitches and Jeremy in the same sentence? Definitely not good. I grab my keys and run out the door.

### CHAPTER 21

#### TRUE CONFESSION

#### BIG D

Driving around in the dark, I lose my way, and GPS is no help. Why aren't there any street lights on these country roads? It reminds of Montana. It isn't lost on me how I've become spoiled to the well-lit highways of Southern California.

"I give up." It's like the ranch has disappeared off the map, while two more messages have come in from Marissa, each one sounding more frantic than the last.

I redirect the map app to guide me to the local hospital, and just hope it's the one Marissa is at. It's as good of a place as any to start.

By the time I arrive, a nurse tells me visiting hours are almost over. I take the stairs by two and reach the third floor. Before stepping out, I pause. This could be a trap. Jeremy could be using Marissa to get to Kallie. That's the kind of shit an unraveling man would do.

Her room 313 is just a couple of doors down the hall that smells of bleach and all the mysterious scents of a hospital. I quietly go there and peek through the rectangular window of her door, gaping at the figure hovering by her bed. It's Jeremy.

I suspect that'd be Marissa, lying in bed with her arm in a cast. Bruising appears across one swollen eye and her nose has a white strip over it. Her dark hair is pulled

back into a ponytail, and I'm not sure but I think I can make out handprints on her neck. I thank my 20/20 vision for being able to pick out these details. The door is slightly ajar, and I can just make out their voices.

"...told you not to push me. Look what you made me do," he seethes, not sounding the least bit sorry.

Her eyes cast downward, not engaging with him in the slightest. What the hell do these women see in him anyway? He's nothing, a bully, preying on innocent women. My nails jab into the skin of my palms, with my fists so tight.

"Where's your phone?" He demands.

"I left it at home." That can't be right, when she's been texting me, er, Kallie's phone.

"I can't trust you. Who knows what you have on there that might incriminate me. Guess I'll have to pay your mother a little visit and get it."

"No, please." That gets a rise out of her. "I'll ask the nurse to call Mom and have her bring it here before she goes to work at noon. Come back tomorrow and I'll have it."

"Fine. Now quit meddling in my life or next time you'll suffer even worse." With that message delivered, he leaves. I scramble, turning and scooting into the adjacent room just in time for him to enter the hallway without discovering me. Luckily the room is empty, so I wait until long after he enters the elevator before I head back to Marissa. Just to make sure he isn't coming back.

Soft sobs can be heard from the door. I gently knock. "Marissa?" It's hard to feel any sympathy for her after the things she's done, from what I know and have been told by Kallie. I can at least agree that Jeremy did a number on her she probably didn't

deserve.

“Who are you?” She gasps, gripping the side rails of the bed.

I put my hands up in front of me and slowly enter the room, thinking fast how to play this. “I’m a friend of Kallie’s. She left my place and went to see her mother, only she left her phone behind. I saw the notifications and?—”

“Oh, you’re that hockey player friend of hers.”

“Cody. So you know about me?”

“Only what Jeremy has told me.”

“Okay. Look, I know you wanted to talk to Kallie, but I don’t have any way to reach her since she left her phone behind. I assure you, though, she’d want to hear your side of the story. She’d want to know why Jeremy did this to you. Also she’d want me to make sure you get the protection you need. Let me call the police so they can help you.”

“No. Jeremy would freak if I got the police involved.”

“Then I can bring Kallie by here tomorrow but... What if it’s too late?”

Her sad chocolate eyes finally lift to meet mine, and through the mess he made of her face, I can see that she’s probably usually pretty. Unfortunately, the dickhead is a soul sucker, and Marissa sold hers to that devil long ago.

Tears escape down her cheeks. “I don’t want to die.”

I gape at her. “Um, has he threatened to...?”



“You’re right, tomorrow may be too late. There’s things that Kallie needs to know, right now.” She takes a phone out from under her pillow, apparently having hid it from Jeremy. She awkwardly leans it against her cast and taps a few things on screen. “Here. I want you to record my confession.”

She hands me her phone, the screen set to record a video. I have a feeling I’m about to hear every answer to all the questions Kallie and I have had.

“Are you sure about this?”

“I’m positive. When we’re done, I’ll text a copy of it to her phone. We’ll both have it, then let the pieces fall where they may because I’m tired, exhausted. I can’t keep living this way anymore.”

“Okay, Marissa. I can help you. Ready?”

By the time the nurses finally kick me out of Marissa’s room, the wheels in my head spin with a plan. But I can’t do this alone. In L.A., I could always turn to my brothers, my Puckers teammates for help. Here, I take a chance and call a few of the defensemen from the Capitals’ team roster.

Not a one of them bat an eye at my request. The brotherhood in Austin is strong. I get two that agree to help. Mike and Jason meet me to carry out a very simple plan to trap Jeremy, threaten him with what I have on him, and scare him all the way out of Austin and out of Kallie’s life for good.

### CHAPTER 22

#### CHAINS

#### BIG D

With a full bucket, I splash water into Jeremy's face. That wakes him up. He gasps, trying to catch a breath. With Mike and Jason's help, we tried to grab him from his bed tonight, to bring him here. Mike had thumped on his head with something and had knocked him unconscious. Not sure what, but it worked.

"Wh-where am I?" He asks.

Despite the lump on his head, he gazes around him, taking in the thick forest, adjusting his eyes to the dark. He'll have no idea where we are. Hell, I don't know either. Jason knew of this old campground tucked away in a state park.

"You." He recognizes me. Good, then I won't have to remind him with my boot up his ass. He eyes the other two men, Jason and Mike, as well and spits blood on the ground at their feet.

Then he tests the chains around his wrist, pulling them. The guys have him good and wrapped to the tree. Anyone happening by would think he's just some local tree hugger, instead of a dangerous man.

"What do you want? Let me go."

“Not until I get my answers. Until then, I’m your worst nightmare come true, motherfucker.” I take the other bucket of water from Mike and dump it on him.

“Stop doing that.” He spits on the ground again.

I take my phone out and press the recording that I’d made earlier of Marissa’s confession. It’s now stored on the pink phone and on mine. I hit play.

“This is Marissa Myers. I’m making this video of my own accord, and not under duress. I want to expose the truth about the Campbell family.”

“What is this? Stop that, now.” Jeremy fights to reach for the phone, but the chains aren’t that long.

“On July fourth in the Summer of 2024, after a heated argument with her husband, Mrs. Isabella Campbell was involved in an accident. Intoxicated behind the wheel of her Mercedes, she ran over a young man, Domenic Aquintas. Unfortunately, he’ll never walk again. Isabella didn’t stop at the scene of the crime. It was a hit and run.”

“No. Shut it off. Please,” Jeremy begs. I let it play. I can’t help but feel a certain part of me doing this for my father. He would have wanted to see justice served.

“The next morning, Mr. Campbell saw the bloodstains on her white car and she confessed to him what happened. Instead of going to the police, he went to Jeremy Whittaker instead.”

“No!” He screams and screams over and over. I simply pause the video until he’s done and ready to listen again. It takes some time, but we’re patient. In fact, Mike takes out a thermos of coffee and pours a cup for each of us. We three sip in our own silence while, just a few feet away, Jeremy’s shouts subside. I push play again.

Marissa recorded this confession like a champ, fully aware of what she was doing. She would not stand by and watch Jeremy ruin people's lives any longer. In many aspects, she was the bravest of us involved in this mess.

“Mr. Campbell had Jeremy do all the dirty work because he didn't want the hit-and-run accident embarrassing him or his family or the team. Jeremy spent much of the summer paying people off to stay quiet, from store owners with video footage that night, to members of the police force, even the victim and his family himself got paid off, reimbursed for any medical bills and a million transferred into their bank account. Anyone and everyone who could pinpoint Isabella as the driver was bribed or threatened.”

“I'll get back at you, Ford.” The man bound by chains dares to threaten me now. I'd like to see him try. I cross my arms and continue listening to the confession.

“This goes so deep, Mr. Campbell would be ruined if it all came to light. He thought he could trust Jeremy, often calling him his son. Only Jeremy got greedy. He held everything over Mr. Campbell's head, demanding more money. A new job. Even pushing to him to demand his daughter, Kallie Campbell, marry Jeremy. He wanted his hands on her sizable trust fund.”

This part gets to me as well. If I hadn't met Kallie, she might have come back from Montana just weak enough to fall back into old patterns, back into his arms, his bed. Unknowing that all along, he only wanted her for the money.

Like I've always said, money can be a burden.

Thank God, I met her, and I like to think our night in Montana did wonders for her, helping her become the woman she was always meant to be.

“How did you come by all of this information, Marissa?” That's my voice on the

video asking her that question.

“Kallie thinks our affair stopped once she found out, but it didn’t. He kept using drugs and seeing me. Only quitting the drugs on Mr. Campbell’s request because he worried Jeremy would screw things up impaired. There were too many details to keep track of to be messed up like that. But he started up again after Kallie got back from Montana.”

“You have no proof. And Marissa is crazy, half strung out all the time herself. No one will believe her.” He’ll stop at nothing to ruin others and not take responsibility for his shit.

“Damn. You’re a real piece of work, aren’t you, Whittaker?” Myself and my teammates get closer, standing tall and imposing over him.

Marissa comes to the end of her confession. “Like Kallie, I did not know this was going on, until one night about a month ago, he came to my house just wasted. He blabbed on and on about it, and I recorded him. The next day when I asked him about all the things he’d said, that’s when the man I thought I loved changed. He turned violent. This isn’t the first visit I’ve made to the hospital because of him. But what he doesn’t know is I set up cameras in my house after the first time. I’ve captured every beating I’ve taken. And now, Jeremy. It’s your turn to pay.”

Sirens play in the distance, down the dark country road. The guy in chains hugging a tree strains his neck, peering out. Finally, red and blue flashing lights break up the night, getting closer and closer.

“I convinced Marissa to turn you into authorities. Mike here has an older brother on the police force, just dying to meet you. They’ll be here any minute to take you away.”

“God no. I can’t live my life in prison. Please fucking help me. Ford, I’ll do anything. I’ll leave Kallie alone. Her family too. Just let me go. Let me go.” As far as a guy groveling for his life, on a scale of one to ten, I give him a zero. Not convincing enough.

I get right up to his face with the fiercest scowl I can muster. “You leave Kallie and her family and Marissa alone. You get out of Austin, too. Far away. If I ever heard of you coming near any of them or us, I’ll haunt you until the day you die.”

The lights and sirens pass and keep going on down the road, never stopping by us.

We abandon him, leaving him in his chains, and climb back into Jason’s SUV. For so long, even I’ve been chained down by the grief over my father’s passing. Hopefully, after tonight, we’re all set free. Except for Jeremy.

“Wait. Wait!” He screams. “You’re leaving me here? Oh, come on. I’m in chains. How the fu?—”

“I’ll come back in a day or two and set him free.” Jason rolls up the windows as we cut across the field. “I’ll bet that felt good after everything he’s put you and Kallie through.”

It does. But I still have to face Kallie in the morning. I’ll leave it up to her how to deal with her parents. I can only hope that we can put this behind us once and for all.

*Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:31 am*

BIG D

A Few Years Later

My phone rings just as I settle into the saddle on my quarter horse, Mister.

Kallie laughs. “Every time we try to escape for a ride, one of us gets a call.”

“Exactly the reason we need to escape, darlin’.” The name on the screen says Saint.  
“Guess who?”

“Oh no. Time for his weekly melt down.” She keeps laughing. “Can you make it fast?  
On an evening like this, we have to catch the sunset.”

I click to answer. “Saint. What’s going on?”

“Tell me again why I’m doing this?”

“Well, most people get married because they’re in love. And I know you two are.” I scratch at my long beard. Kallie calls me her mountain man nowadays instead of her cowboy.

“Right.” He sighs heavily into the phone, like he’s been holding his breath all day. I told him the day he said they were planning a huge wedding, that he really should consider what Kallie and I did. We got married in Vegas at a little chapel on the strip, easy peasy. What a wild and fun night that was, too.

With a month to go before Saint's wedding, these calls are more frequent from him. I have to assure him every single time. "You're fine, buddy. She's fine. In fact, she's a saint to be taking your ass on, and you'd better show up at the altar or I'll kick your ass. Your playboy days are behind you. In fact, you told me once that she's the woman to make you forget all the rest."

"You're right. Yes. Okay. I can do this. Thanks, D. Can't wait to see you at off-season conditioning camp." We're all gathering again this summer, even if some of us don't play hockey anymore.

After everything that went down in Austin, when Kallie learned the truth, she begged her parents to do the right thing. Her father still put up a fight, but her mother picked up the phone and called the police after calling their lawyer. She said she had enough and wanted to turn her life around.

As for Kallie and me, we both got in with the new Las Vegas expansion team. She works in the office, as the head of marketing. I played for a few years on the team until an injury sidelined me. Unlike her ex, though, I spent a summer in Montana healing. Stark contrast to Jeremy and his reliance on drugs.

Speaking of, we never heard from Jeremy again after the night I chained him to a tree.

Vegas was good for us for a few years. But Montana is where my cowgirl and I were always meant to be.

Duke had heard of a ranch up for sale next door to his property, and we had to move quickly as there'd been a rich man from back east buying up all the smaller properties around him. Word was, the man planned a rescue operation for horses, run by military veterans, called the Off-Duty Rescue Ranch, modeling it off his similar ranch already in existence out in Virginia.



Our offer was accepted, and right away we built a beautiful log home big enough for a couple of kids, someday. We're in no hurry. We also built a little cottage for her mother to stay in when she gets out of prison. Her dad still owns the Austin team, but has sold his ranch and lives in the city, keeping a low profile. We don't hear from him much except on holidays when she calls him with a quick hello.

Duke's camp has grown so huge and popular, it's open all summer now for various hockey groups. Duke and Phoebe finally realized it was too big for the two of them to run, so they hired me to help manage it along with new seasonal staff.

I hang up from Saint and lean over in my saddle, giving my wife a kiss. "Ready to ride?"

"Yep. Try to keep up with me, cowboy." She kicks Rosie and away they go. Oh, and we finally got a dog. A black and white collie mix.

"Come on, Brewster." The dog follows along the trail with us. We head straight toward the indigo mountains surrounding our valley, eventually coming to the top of our favorite ridge.

Our valley has sure grown. From here, if we look to the left, there's Duke's place, and to the right there's the Off-Duty Rescue Ranch. Straight ahead is all ours.

This is where we'll live happily ever after for the rest of our lives together. Dad once told me to know when to hold on tight, and when to let go. I'm so glad I held onto my cowgirl. I kiss the back of her hand, knowing everything is finally as it is meant to be.

Ready for Saint and Anastasia's story?

You can first read a fun, short story featuring the two of them hooking up one Halloween night in the "Stroke of Midnight" currently featured in the f-r-e-e Masked and Ready to Score Anthology .